

RIVERS
TO
CROSS

ROLAND
PERTWEE

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RIVERS TO CROSS

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BY
ROLAND PERTWEE



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PART I

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PART I

I

Is Dixie, I wonder, an exception to the rest of the world? In all the songs that were ever written, Dixie embraces her returning sons with open arms and roses and smiling faces and moonbeams and beckoning sheaves of corn and all the lyrist's paraphernalia of welcome. Other places by comparison, and England in particular, seem lacking in warmth.

Perhaps the long absent traveller expects too much — and envisages a state of national jubilation arising out of his return that is seldom of a piece with what really happens.

The old country, like the old acquaintance, nods its greeting, proceeds on its way to all appearances unmoved. A few bottles of champagne may be cracked, a few cigars smoked, yarns exchanged and invitations proffered, and the joy of homecoming is absorbed in the plain interest of every day. Such at least was my experience back from the sweaty beastliness and isolation of the Congo after five years spent in the company of cannibalistic blacks and a few degenerate whites, who, of the two, were the less agreeable companions.

I had looked forward to London as a country child looks forward to a fair. The vista before me was painted in the bright colours of a roundabout. Delights from which I had long been separated were taking shape before me; golf links — beer with a lump of

ice in it — a day at the pheasants — a few of the lighter comedies — a bit of hunting, and last but supremely foremost the company of women. In some way, I believe, I expected all these desirable things would be waiting to meet me in a crystallized form on the quay at Southampton; a man with a couple of setters, a fellow in plus fours with a bag of clubs slung at his shoulder, a row of English girls with cheeks like pinks. My imagination had been stirred by the second act of a musical comedy picked up overnight off the Start by the ship's wireless. The instrument was badly tuned — the entertainment was marred by groans and poppings and atmospherics, but, this notwithstanding, it released a long-pent yearning for England. That chorus of voices singing a foolish refrain across the wet mists of the Channel made a lump rise in my throat. I could have cheered, and would have done so in better company; but apart from a tipsy Scotch trader and a Welsh revivalist, every soul on that dirty, ill-kempt steamship was a foreigner of this sort or that — a hairy-toed crowd with a streak of coloured blood and little to recommend them for partnership in joy.

Certainly it was asking a great deal to expect a dock-side wharf at five o'clock on a foggy morning to present a lively appearance. There was the usual crowd of stevedores, a few customs officials, and a man with a megaphone to direct the business of mooring. That was all. England!

At that moment, more acutely than ever before, I regretted that I was not married. It would have been good to recognize the face of a woman of one's own — some one who cared and to whom absence or return were terrible or happy events in life. But there was no one. Apart from a few good chaps I liked and who professed to like me, messmates of the Great War and men

I had come to know in pleasure and business, it made no odds if I spent the rest of my days on the top of Everest. I was not essential to anybody's well-being, and, come to that, nobody was essential to mine.

Thus, as the propeller gave its final throb and the ship shuddered as her fenders bumped against the pier, my cheerful expectations gave way to intense loneliness. I stepped ashore unwelcomed, unrecognized. England absorbed me with as little interest as a river absorbs a shower of rain. At the barrier a boy in uniform gave me an unstamped letter and a telegram.

The telegram was from Marian Livesay.

It was typical — delightful. It swept away gloom.

Bless you — you are home. Marshall and I are at Harde-
lot. Come and see us as soon as you can. It's lovely here —
bathing, poaching, and awfully nice girls.

Good old Marian! It was like her to be the first. Marshall too. He'd become quite a pot since I left England — Attorney-General, complete with a knighthood and, in the pursuance of his labours both at the House and the Law Courts, under the permanent ægis of picked members of the police force. I wondered if he were still the same schoolboy at heart, had still the old gipsy streak which led him in his rare moments of recreation into all manner of crazy escapades. I hoped that the beautiful scarlet leather dispatch-box which His Majesty the King presents to his law officers had not robbed him of those qualities which made him the best holiday companion a man ever possessed.

And Marian too, with the immense family of hers which somehow left her younger after each new arrival. It was splendid to hear from her so soon — splendid to know that they were waiting to welcome an old friend — and it was amusing to note that she was still

the inveterate match-maker I had known five years earlier. 'Bathing, poaching, and awfully nice girls.' I could imagine her saying to Marshall:

'Nigel Praed is back; we must really get him settled down this time.'

And Marshall:

'Why not leave the poor devil alone? Damn it, the way you women obstruct freedom is a national disgrace.'

Then one of those rows of theirs, which, to my thinking, were the neatest form of love-making a fifteen-year-married couple ever devised.

I remembered the day I sailed for the Congo, Marian shaking her curly head at me from the back seat of a big Delage, which Marshall always drove, to the public danger, shaking her mop of hair and saying:

'I do believe, Nigel, you're the most obstinate wretch God ever put breath into. But you wait, my boy. Next time.'

I should have liked to kiss her good-bye, but if I'd dared, Marshall would certainly have knocked me down — friend or no friend. There was a primal streak in Marshall which I liked and understood. I recall a story of him at Albert during the War. He had lost the wallet containing Marian's photograph. It was found by a fellow officer in the huge crater on the Albert-Bapaume road. Instead of thanking him for finding the case, Marshall kicked him for not returning it sooner.

'Sentimental swine,' said the victim of ingratitude, grinning and rubbing himself.

He scored there, for Marshall never admitted to a vestige of sentiment.

'I've a certain amount of property and I look after it,' was his explanation. 'A wife is like a watch and won't go unless you wind it up.'

Marshall and Marian! Very real folks the pair of 'em — and my friends.

I crammed the wire and the unread letter into my pocket and beckoned to a rickety old taxi which was snuffling by the sheds.

'There's only this grip,' I said to the driver, heaving a Gladstone bag into the space beside him; 'my heavy luggage is mailed through to London.'

I was getting into the taxi when the uniformed boy touched my sleeve.

'Beg pardon, sir, the gentleman said there was an answer to the letter.'

'What gentleman?'

'Not very sure of the name — would it be Palestine?'

'Palatine,' I exclaimed. 'Why didn't you tell me? Where is he?'

'In bed, sir. Room sixteen, Great Western Hotel.'

I frowned.

'In bed — you sure?'

'Yes, sir.'

I opened the letter and read it.

DEAR PRAED, — As your boat is scheduled to arrive at 5 A.M., I suggest you come along to the hotel and we have a bit of breakfast together at nine. This'll give you time for a bath and a shave. I've told 'em to keep a room for you. I expect you'll come straight up to Sheffield with me and go through your report to the Board.

I didn't think there was much point in coming down to the quay as you were arriving so early, and it's un-Christian to discuss business before 10 A.M. Congratulations on your work and safe return.

Yours sincerely

NEVILLE PALATINE

I crumpled the letter and pitched it into the gutter. 'What time is the first train to London?' I asked.

‘There’s one at seven forty-five, sir.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘I’ll catch it. Convey my compliments to Mr. Palatine and tell him, as he didn’t think it worth while to come down to the boat, he looks like missing me altogether.’

The boy grinned doubtfully.

‘Just that,’ said I, and got into the taxi.

The good humour inspired by Marian’s wire was driven away by this offhand scrawl of Palatine’s. If the fellow was too lazy to come and meet a man whose work for the firm of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine had resulted in opening up seven hundred miles of palm oil area that was bringing in an annual revenue rapidly approaching half a million — if he was too lazy to come down and say how-de-do and make himself pleasant, then he and all his works could go to the devil and stay there.

Five hundred miles of railway had I laid through jungle, swamp, and mountain. Two hundred miles of hitherto unnavigated river now heard the daily chunking of the stern-wheeler fleet which I had designed and created section by section and plate by plate with labour which didn’t know a hammer from a rivet — a drill from an anvil. And this for the firm of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine. At least it was theirs for the purposes of argument.

I am not as a rule a boastful man, but I had tackled a big job with satisfactory results and I expected the firm to say so. Certainly I was in no mood for patronage from any young blighter who valued an extra hour or so between the sheets higher than a reputation for good manners.

Nor was that my sole complaint. Neville Palatine, but two years down from college, was the least important partner of that terrific commercial and engi-

neering organization to which he lent his name. At least I had expected Ribault or Zealer to meet me. Sending this boy, who when last I saw him only shaved every other day, was casual.

If he wanted me he could come and find me, which is precisely what he did and with a better grace than I gave him credit for.

Short of breath and pale of face from the earliness of the hour, his B.N.C. tie twisted into a hurried knot, he burst into the station refreshment-room where I was attacking four poached eggs, some sizzling rashers of bacon, and a thick cup full of an astonishing compound that was certainly not coffee. After a hasty glance at the other patrons he came to my table.

'Mr. Nigel Praed?'

I nodded over the steam which rose from my cup.

'I'm Neville Palatine.'

I said, 'Aha!' and went on with my breakfast.

'I'm afraid you'll think I was terribly rude not coming down to meet you.'

I did not deny it, though the boy's looks and his crestfallen air robbed me of the annoyance I had felt.

'Ribault was coming himself, but he had a touch of 'flu and wasn't let. Zealer is at Amsterdam over a big steel contract. So there was only me.'

'And you,' I said good-naturedly, 'were too tired for the job.'

'I've earned it,' he acknowledged, 'and I hope you'll be sport enough not to let the others know; but as a matter of fact there was a dance at Bournemouth last night.'

'That's all right,' said I, shaking hands, 'but when a man's been buried in a jungle for a leash of years he is apt to be touchy about trifles. Was the dance good?'

'Top notch. But you want to talk business.'

'Business is the last thing I want to talk. That's why I'm dodging the firm's invitation to Sheffield.'

'But you don't mean ——'

'Believe me, I do. There's a certain germ of gladness in my veins which only London — the clubs, theatres, and society of a few old friends can inoculate me against. Until it's out of the system I don't want to hear the words Congo, palm oil, or the names of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine. It's nice of you to have come to meet me and nice of you to apologize for not turning up a bit sooner. That little affair being settled, I am now off on a tour of joy.'

'Not seriously?'

'By no means seriously, but as flippantly, as idiotically, and as expensively as I can. After all,' I added, 'there's nothing to talk about. My job's done, and the man who has taken over seems thoroughly capable to run the show. Tell Mr. Ribault if he can think of anything worth my while in about three months' time, I'll be charmed to give him my best attention. Till then, au 'voir.'

Young Palatine looked rueful.

'They told me this 'ud happen,' he said. 'They told me you were the most obstinate beggar alive. Matter of fact,' he added, 'that's the real reason why I sent you that letter instead of waiting at the quay.'

'Eh?'

'I thought if I planted the idea that we didn't really care a hill of beans about your return, it might lure you up to Sheffield to have a row.'

'Strategy,' said I.

'A poor effort,' said he. 'To tell the truth, Mr. Praed, there is not an employee that the firm think so highly of as you. You're our by-word for all that's efficient.'

I rose heavily and bowed.

'Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley,' said I.

Outside a guard was shouting:

'Take your seats, please.'

2

To Salisbury I had the carriage to myself. The sight of the green chess-boarded English landscape was as good to me as a plunge into cool water after an age beneath a blistering sun. The cottage gardens with their dadoes of phloxes and hollyhocks — the teamster crawling along winding lanes with straw-bearded hedges — cattle, mirrored in pools — pine-fringed heather slopes and valleys dotted with oak and elm — children in bright pinafores swinging on gates awoke in me such gladness that I was hard put to it to prevent myself breaking out into a song of praise. That I succeeded is due to the fact that my singing, by common consent, my own included, has always been regarded as a deterrent rather than an incentive to joy. It is true, during the War for a period of ten days I earned a precarious livelihood griddling the Song of Hate through the streets of German towns, but the small change I received for my efforts was bestowed more for the substance of the words than for any vocal enchantments I may have revealed.

I remember once singing the infernal thing at the Station Gates in Düsseldorf when a train-load of British prisoners was being herded into lorries. How ashamed I was, and when one of the young officers, a boy wearing fusilier badges, broke ranks and hit me in the mouth with the back of his hand, Lord! how I longed to clap him on the back and claim him brother. One of the guard dropped the butt of his rifle on the boy's head, then turned and grinned at me. I shall

never forget the loathing for me in that boy's eyes before they went blank from the cowardly blow — I shall never forget the grin on the guard's face and the kind of 'that's the sort of man I am' look he gave me. Had he known it, the merest shadow of common prudence divided him from a .450 calibre bullet trained at the pit of his stomach from the pocket of my ragged jacket. It was not all jam, that kind of work. There were some pretty hectic experiences in the two and a half years I spent in enemy territories during the War. Apart from fear there was the blank loneliness of it. Even when it was over and, out of the order of war, nations were plunged into the disorder of peace, one was denied the satisfaction of talking the terror and dreariness of that period out of the system. The branch of the Secret Service in which I was enlisted did not encourage loquacity then or thereafter. You were there to do a job, obtain certain information and forget forthwith how it was come by. It taught one to bottle things up, stew in one's own juice, stand on one's own feet. The man who talked generally died strangely and rather rapidly.

At Salisbury the train pulled up and my carriage was invaded by a foreign lady's-maid and a heavily laden porter who proceeded to fill the opposite rack with a variety of suit-cases, golf sticks, tennis rackets, and female impedimenta. This done, they retired, leaving me to conjecture from the evidence before me what sort of travelling companion was to bear me company for the remainder of the journey. Clearly the owner of these belongings was young and active — also, *vide* a pair of brogued shoes attached by the laces to her golf bag, she had small feet. Her name, as I was able to verify from three tag labels, was Philida Prothero — a pleasant and alliterative amalgam. By putting my

head on one side I was able to see that her destination was Boulogne, via Victoria and Folkestone. The number of stick labels on one end of a dressing-bag informed me that she had wintered abroad, having visited Switzerland, the Italian lakes, and a number of other places. One of the labels was difficult to decipher owing to the superimposition of others. It revealed the letters ICA, and beneath, AZORES. It took me a minute to decide that the complete names were probably Ponta Rica, Azores. There was something familiar in the name which for the moment escaped me until I recalled Ponta Rica as the small island north of the Azores group taken over from Germany by the British under the Treaty of Versailles, and now under the military governorship of General Sir Francis Prothero, K.C.M.G., D.S.O.

Prothero the girl's father! I was progressing famously. There was something else I knew about Sir Francis if I could get the top off the brain cell that held the knowledge. Wait a bit! it was coming back; the man was known throughout the service by a sobriquet—the—the—'The Mule.'

In the mental effort of reconstructing that bit of stored information I had shut my eyes and said it sharply and aloud at the precise moment that the daughter of that gallant but stubborn officer stepped into the carriage.

It is not an encouraging introduction to any young lady for a complete stranger to explode in her face frivolous names by which her relations may be called. I should not have been astonished if Miss Prothero had summoned the maid and the porter and removed her belongings to another compartment. However, she did not appear to suffer from nerves or anxieties. Beyond throwing in my direction a swift, inquiring

glance, she took no further notice of me. The maid, who had accompanied her to the door, was of a different mind and muttered a few words I did not catch. Miss Philida shook her head.

A further question:

'Would you like me to travel with you, mademoiselle?' received the answer:

'No.'

Miss Philida disappeared behind the pages of an illustrated daily, the maid retired to another carriage, the train steamed out of the station, and I became aware that I was alone with an exceptionally attractive girl whose dark, almost black hair was glinted with unexpected threads of copper.

It was a long time since I had seen an attractive girl, and even longer since I had seen dark hair glinted with copper. The sensation was delightful. I forgot what few manners I may ordinarily possess, and instead of preserving the air of polite isolation expected between travelling companions of opposite sexes, I laid my newspaper aside and stared in admiration. In defence it is fair to say that her face was hidden behind the pages of the 'Daily Mirror' and there was no reason to suppose that she was aware of what I was doing. I had forgotten that women possess a sixth sense which instantly records waves of admiration or disapproval that emanate from their fellow creatures. That sixth sense is far too powerful to be insulated by a few sheets of paper. It can feel through walls and wide spaces and over great distances. Thus, while I stared Miss Philida knew I was staring and, at a moment least expected, lowered the screen that separated her eyes from mine and remarked in an everyday voice underlined by a curiously authoritative tone:

'What's the matter?'

I was so startled that I stumbled dismally in an effort to reply.

'Nothing — nothing at all — that is, I really beg your pardon. I'm afraid I was very rude.'

'Rude, why?'

'For staring in that very — er ——'

'Were you? I thought you wanted something. A match or a cigarette.'

'No, I have both,' I answered lamely, producing a packet of Player's and a pocket-lighter in evidence.

'Well, that's all right,' said she, and shook out the folds of her paper again.

I had been snubbed and I knew it. Also I had merited snubbing, but as we had passed the rubicon of silence even at the risk of worse happening to me, I was determined to carry our talk a stage further. Miss Philida, with her eccentric air of being able to look after herself, was a new type to me — a crystallization of the post-war girl with whose development absence from England had denied me the opportunity of becoming acquainted. Here was something more than the racy 'you-be-damned,' 'take it or leave it,' self-confident if self-insufficient girl of the 1918-19 brand. The intervening years had refined the type which had come into existence through an alchemy of hospital wards, munition works, and ambulance services. This was a more finished product altogether. Self-contained rather than self-confident. Less strapping and man-to-mannish — less slangy, oathy, and startling — and oddly enough more essentially feminine.

I had heard it said, or had read somewhere, that the modern woman in her forward march develops herself away from timidity. Before me was an example of the truth of the claim. To remove fear from life is to create chaos, but to subdue useless fears, trivial alarms, and

petty nervousness is clearly a character gain beyond price.

With sudden mortification I realized that of us two — this girl and myself — it was I, not she, who was the victim of embarrassment. Time had reversed the process, and here was I conducting myself like a bashful Victorian maiden who had been addressed by a stranger on a foggy night. As I did not fancy myself in so modest a character, self-respect demanded a counter-offensive. Accordingly I said:

‘As you were first to suggest it, do you mind if I smoke?’

‘Do,’ said she.

‘Won’t you?’ I asked, and offered the packet.

She said:

‘No.’

I said:

‘Don’t you ever?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘P’r’aps you don’t care for Virginians?’

She did not reply and I told her I never smoked anything else. At that she folded her newspaper once and once again, took off her hat, pitched it into the rack, ran her fingers comb fashion through her exciting hair, looked at me with the kind of pitying wonder that a taxi-driver looks at a hansom-cab, and said:

‘If you must talk, talk. Don’t just say things.’

After a deep and thoughtful pause, I replied:

‘I suppose the ethics of the situation demand that I shouldn’t talk, but I’m very much afraid I shall have to. It’s five years since I talked to a real English girl, and that’s excuse enough for any man.’

She betrayed a quickening interest.

‘Five years. Have you been in prison?’

‘Technically, yes — actually, no.’

‘Either you have or you haven’t.’

‘Then I haven’t.’ I saw the interest die out of her hazel eyes, and added, ‘Unless you would call Central Africa a prison.’

‘Oh, so that’s it,’ said she, ‘and I suppose you’re in a hurry to find some one to listen to your experiences. Go ahead.’

‘You’re entirely wrong, Miss Prothero — that’s the last thing I want to do.’

I marked the puzzled frown at the mention of her name — a frown which gave way to a look of comprehension as her quick brain grasped the source of my information. Then her eyes went above my head.

‘Been reading my labels, Mr. Nigel Praed?’

Her swiftiness startled me.

‘It’s a most enthralling pastime,’ I said. ‘I was busy constructing your personality from your luggage when you came in.’

‘Mine or my father’s?’

‘Then I was right and he is your father?’

‘Who — The Mule? Yes.’

‘I owe you an apology for that too.’

‘You don’t — I like that part of his reputation better than any other. The name fits him like a silk sock. How did you know he was called The Mule?’

‘I happened to remember it.’

‘All the Protheros are like that,’ she went on. ‘Stubborn as what for, and always stubborn about different things. We never agree and we never give way.’

She looked at me with half-closed eyes and a puckered brow — a painter’s look.

‘Yes, what?’ I asked, for she seemed to be searching for something.

‘Your eyebrows. They’re up-ended like father’s and like mine. They don’t droop. That’s queer.’

'Why queer?'

'It's one of the signs — that and a small cut line above the corners of the mouth. Turn a bit. You've got that too — clearly.'

'What does it imply?'

'Obstinacy, of course. Are you?'

'Well,' I acknowledged, 'if I tackle anything I like to see it through.'

She nodded.

'Sometimes that's useful. Sometimes it makes people wooden-headed and egotistic. Sometimes it accounts for their being packed off to outlandish places.'

I sat upright.

'Are you suggesting I've been packed off to an outlandish place?'

She threw up her head and laughed.

'Shouldn't wonder. Both you and father. I can imagine the W.O. and the Colonial Office getting together and saying, "This man is all right and does his job well, but let him do it in some place where he'll get on as few people's nerves as possible." Hence Ponta Rica.'

I grinned at the shrewdness of her insight, more especially as I could imagine a similar consultation in the Board Room of the firm of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine.

'Apart from a very unfilial analysis of the motives which inspired your father's appointment, what sort of place is Ponta Rica?' I asked.

'Never been there?'

I shook my head.

'It's a comic opera sort of place — a mix-up of the Rock of Gibraltar — the Caves of Granada — any old Mediterranean port — a German beer garden — the Kasbah at Algiers with a spice of Monte Carlo thrown

in. Pure — or perhaps impure cosmopolitan! No one has begun to understand it. Perhaps that's why they sent father there, because he never understands anything but his own point of view, which he administers according to the terms of the Manual of Military Law and King's Regs. It's a regular hotch-potch of pseudo-society people: Jews from the Levant — semi-Orientals — Portuguese, and, just recently, rather attractive English ex-army officers who bootleg whiskey to the States. If you haven't been, you should go. When it was German-owned they made some efforts to organize it as an Atlantic naval and military base, but as it was perfectly clear the English fleet could have blown it out of the water, they more or less let it go. A few old dugouts were left in charge, but the Prussian spirit does not prosper away from the Prussian soil — the climate beat them and they degenerated rapidly into professional drinkers who were too drunk even to rattle their sabres. That's about all, except that there's a casino — a perfectly disgraceful old town which is going to be demolished — a lot of bougainvillea and pig lilies and something in the air which makes people very affectionate and quarrelsome.'

The lucid picture of the island of Ponta Rica coming from lips of such a youngster fairly startled me. Her drollery of phrase, good-natured cynicism, and clear outlook marked Miss Philida Prothero as a girl in a class all by herself.

'I suppose,' I said, 'now the island is under British rule everything is changed.'

She shook her head.

'Not it. A few bugles are blown in the main squares, but tom-toms rattle and guitars twang up the side streets. I don't think England has made up her mind what to do with Ponta Rica yet. The Navy regard it

with a covetous eye and the Mercantile Marine talk about it as a coal port, but there's only one potty little harbour and the water's too deep to build a bigger one. Some of the blither politicians are in favour of trying to push it as a winter resort — roulette, *tir aux pigeons*, and Lenglen playing tennis on hard courts. That way, properly advertised, it would pay like smoke.'

'A casino on British soil! That's a startling thought.'

'The world has grown up a bit in the last five years.'

I had observed as much without being told.

'And how does your father contemplate such an arrangement?'

'With indignation, of course; but that means nothing. Father is always indignant about other people's ideas. He sees them through bushy brows. Ponta Rica is his toy — his painted fortress — his box of soldiers. He cannot tolerate commercial enterprise or the thought of people enjoying themselves. His idea of a real picnic is a declaration of war. Anything in the nature of peace is abhorrent to him — even in the home. He's all for the martial stuff.'

'Then I take it he's in favour of turning Ponta Rica into a naval base.'

'Good Heavens, no. He doesn't approve of sailors or battleships or war vessels. The only floating thing that has his approval is a transport. Father speaks of the Navy as the junior service.'

'You merciless critic,' I said and shook my head at her, when to my astonishment she produced a totally different side to her character — a tenderness I had not expected.

'I'm not really. We fight — but that's because I'm fond of him and fighting pleases him.'

'And your mother?' I asked.

'Mother gave up the fight almost before I can remember.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, that's all right — though I do miss her. It must sound stupid to talk of missing some one you've almost forgotten.'

'Not at all. It's possible to miss people you've never even met. I've discovered the truth of that in more times and places than I care to think about.'

'From a sense of loneliness you mean?'

'Yes, picturing the kind of people you wish to be with and doubting if you'll ever have the luck to run up against such a one.'

Miss Philida looked at me critically but not unkindly. Then she said almost to herself:

'No, that would be unfair.'

'Eh! What would be unfair?'

'I was on the point of accusing you of putting down the lonely man's barrage.'

The shade of laughter at the back of her eyes was infectious.

'Pon my soul,' I replied honestly, 'I believe I was nearly doing so. Anyway I'll not deny a sense of gratitude for the luck of having met you.'

'All right,' she nodded. 'I shan't reproach you. It's the sort of male civility that sooner or later was bound to come.'

'Agreed, but in this case do me the justice of believing I am sincere.'

'I suppose if I hadn't spoken to a man for five years I should pay him compliments. Scarcity is a fine incentive to appreciation.'

'If I knew you better,' I said, 'I should make you eat your words, whatever that may mean.'

She was not disturbed by the threat. She was looking away from me, engaged apparently in a thought wrestle with a difficult opponent.

'I'd like to know what's puzzling you,' I queried.

Her answer was surprising.

'Your good faith. If all men are liars, I'm wondering what class to put you in. No, that isn't offensive. It's rather fun. I'm asking myself how a man who's been separated for ages from the society of women can pretend to have enjoyed a geographical discourse from the first young woman he meets.'

'The fact remains,' said I.

'A man who has been picturing the kind of girl he would like to be with.'

'Well?'

She looked me square in the face.

'Deny if you can,' she said, 'that your picture was of a totally different kind. Sparkling eyes — tripping toes — a song — a dance — a supper tête-à-tête — whispering fragments of nonsense — touching hands — fairy lights and some small tenderness on a riverside lawn with saxophones playing heavenly jazz in the not-too-far distance.'

'Philida Prothero,' I said, 'to prove all men are liars by the exception who speaks the truth, I admit with shame that your picture of my picture is right to the uttermost detail.'

Out popped the gay, trickling laugh.

'It's divine of you to confess it, for how could it be otherwise?'

And then I'll be hanged if that infernal train didn't pull up with a jolt in Waterloo Station.

Miss Philida got up and held out a hand.

'Have a good time — paint your picture and enjoy yourself.'

'At least,' I said, 'you'll let me drive you to Victoria.'

She became instantly grave.

'Nigel Praed,' she said, 'you've got much too good a

face to behave like a schoolboy. It's been fun meeting; let's leave it at that.'

'Leave it until when?'

She smiled.

'I am always at home officially on the second and fourth Wednesday of the month.'

'Address?'

'Government House, Ponta Rica.'

'Thanks,' said I, 'and what are you doing this Tuesday?'

'Weather permitting, I shall be bathing in the sea at Hardelot.'

It was then I realized how generous a lady is Fate.

'That being so,' said I, 'please to reserve a wave for me.'

Slapping the pocket which contained Marian's invitation, and, smiling to myself, I stepped out on the platform.

3

I MADE a mistake to imagine I could elude my responsibilities to the firm of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine by merely stopping away from Sheffield. Mohammed having refused to come to the mountain, the mountain, well represented by the person of Mr. Ribault, came to Mohammed.

I always admired old Ribault as a genial, persuasive, and tremendously active personality. His figure, which was Johnsonian in bulk and rotundity, gave the impression that he was a self-indulgent, comfort-loving, and idle old man. This impression was heightened by the very untidy and shapeless clothes he wore. Except in the evenings, when he was dressed faultlessly, he never appeared in a single suit, but in a composite of three — a tweed coat, a blue serge vest, and

trousers of some other pattern and material. It was impossible to believe these articles of apparel had even been ordered and paid for. They had the appearance of having been robbed from a scarecrow or a rubbish heap. In spite of his size they were always too big for him and hung like grubby curtains from his huge sloping shoulders. Old Ribault was never without a cigar in his mouth — when it was out he chewed the butt until it was time to light a fresh one. He did not even remove it for the purpose of depositing the ash in a proper receptacle. As he talked the ash fell upon and lodged in the folds of his waistcoat, not infrequently burning the cloth into holes. Curiously enough, he was never-faillingly distressed by this accident, and without exception claimed against the insurance company for the damage wrought. And always, having regard to the enormous annual sums paid by the firm to underwriters, his foible was respected and the trifling claims were paid without protest. Another interesting if unattractive characteristic was his cough. I have never heard such a cough. It was the apotheosis of the bronchial. It made a noise exactly like a huge coil-spring released against a row of saucepan lids. It crashed out to the dismay of strangers and the delight of children. For the rest he had large hands — very small feet — eyes that looked as if they could pierce armour plate — a trim grey beard badly stained with nicotine, and a set of pearly white teeth which the dentist who supplied them must have designed for a chorus girl.

Breathing hard from the exertion of coming up in the elevator, old James Ribault presented himself at my bedside at 7.30 of the clock on the morning following my arrival in London.

Further to announce his identity he let go one of his

coughs, which fairly sent the bedclothes flying and me to a sitting posture, gaping and rubbing my eyes.

'Hallo, m'dear,' said he. 'Was half afraid I'd find you were out.'

It was his habit to address members of either sex, to whom he was attached, as 'm'dear.'

'That young Palatine made a mess of bringing you up, so I came along. Here!' He picked up a comb and threw it to me. 'Pass that through your hair. Can't bear talking to a man with a tousled head.'

Remembering his weakness for tonsorial perfection, I laughingly carried out his orders.

He lit a new cigar and offered me the open case.

'No — well, please yourself, m'dear. H'm, tropics don't seem to have done you much harm. Feeling all right? That's good. We're glad to have you back. Pretty good job you made of things — and did pretty well yourself, eh?'

'No complaints.'

'Ah. Hope a decent banking account hasn't spoiled you — made you flabby.'

'I haven't had much time to see.'

'Hope you're ready to get into harness again.'

'If by that you mean you hope I'm not taking a holiday, you'll be disappointed, sir. I've a lot of leeway to make up.'

Old Ribault made an exclamation of disgust, crossed to the window, threw it wide open, muttered something about fresh air being the thing, returned, sat down heavily on my bed and enveloped me in a cloud of venomous cigar smoke.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he said, 'a day or so — a week or so won't matter — but after that there's a job — a live job — and you're the man for it.'

'Now look here,' said I. 'We know each other pretty

well and you won't be offended at my saying I've no mind to be hustled into making promises before I've shaken the sleep out of my eyes. You've worked the early-morning trick on me before and that's taught me to be wary. Why not take a stroll along the Embankment and give me an hour to spruce myself?'

He shook his head.

'I'm catching the nine o'clock back to Sheffield. We'll have a peck of breakfast together. Hop into a bath while it's cooking.'

Without waiting for my consent, he rang the bell and told the waiter to bring him half a melon, four kippers 'well frazzled,' some pressed beef, and a quart of beer in a lead pot, beside which my order of bacon and eggs and coffee sounded like the chirp of a sparrow.

Breakfast, which appeared as I fastened my collar stud, was consumed by old Ribault in an impressive silence proper to so sturdy a meal. He was a man who believed in doing one thing at a time and doing it thoroughly. Having devoured his rations to the uttermost morsel, he finished the beer, lit a cigar, pushed back his chair and said:

'The job I want you for calls for tact, ingenuity, and tenacity. In brief, it is the construction of a flying-ground that needn't be more, but mustn't be less, than a square half-mile.'

I looked at him blankly.

'No, m'dear, it isn't a matter of cutting down trees, filling up holes, and doing away with hedges. The ground in question is rocky, sloping; and mountainous — a devil of a bit of ground.'

'Why choose it then?' I asked. 'After all, twenty miles this way or that won't affect a 'plane.'

'Twenty miles this way or that 'ud mean landing in the sea,' he retorted dryly.

'Oh! an island?'

'Precisely, and for our purpose a very vicious little island too.'

'And what is your purpose?'

'A fleet of commercial aëroplanes. Daily service between England and the United States.'

I shook my head.

'That dream!'

'Something more than a dream, my clever young friend. Granted a midway landing-place it 'ud be a tangible and profitable reality. Get me that landing-place and I wouldn't take five million for the sum the Amalgamated Steamship Lines 'ud offer me not to run the service.'

I knew old Ribault to be probably one of the shrewdest business brains in the country, but for him to associate himself with some crazy Atlantic aërial navigation scheme was fantastic. I imagine something of the kind must have been revealed in my face, for he said quickly:

'A good deal has happened, my dear, during the last five years — a good deal you know nothing about. You've never heard, maybe, of the Billiter Quadru-plane?'

'I remember the Billiter Bomber.'

He nodded.

'Multiply that by six and add a twenty-foot saloon — a fifteen-foot smoking-room — passenger accommodation for thirty-two, and you've some idea of the machine I'm talking about. That, however, is not the point — you supply the landing-place and I'll run the fleet.'

'I take it, then, this monster of yours isn't equal to the distance?'

Old Ribault humped his fat shoulders.

'She could fly round the world and back if she could carry enough fuel, but more fuel means fewer passengers — and fewer passengers means less revenue.'

'So you're asking me to shave the tops off mountains so that they can fill up at a mid-Atlantic petrol pump. It seems to me, Mr. Ribault, that is a contractor's job. The companies who level up tennis courts could manage as well as I could.'

'M'dear,' said old Ribault tolerantly, 'there are greater difficulties than mountains to overcome.'

'For example?'

'Prejudice, competition, officialdom, and enough red tape to strangle a hundred bigger enterprises than this.'

I scented an interest.

'International complications?'

'Worse. International complications can generally be settled by a long banking account. But a long banking account won't gain you a rung up the ladder against British conservative pig-headedness.'

'British,' I exclaimed and saw daylight. 'Mr. Ribault, where is this island?'

He looked at me and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

'Until I have your consent to come into the scheme, Praed, I shall leave that question unanswered.'

'Chuff!' said I, 'it answers itself. Ponta Rica; and the difficulties you anticipate are from the Colonial Office, the War Office, the Admiralty, and the person of the Military Governor, Sir Francis Prothero, K.C.M.G., D.S.O.'

Old Ribault nodded.

'I'll not dispute it. Indeed, I refused you the information only to satisfy myself that you hadn't lost your powers of reasoning. Well, now, what do you say?'

I did not reply for a moment; my thoughts were

occupied by the extraordinary coincidence that twice within forty-eight hours I had come into touch with Ponta Rica. The chance meeting with Philida Prothero had produced a startling effect upon me. Never for an instant would the picture of her leave my mind. And here was old Ribault trying to persuade me to engage in a difficult campaign against her father. I had resolved that come what might I would contrive to better our acquaintance, and to that end had already wired accepting Marian's invitation. And now came Ribault's commission, carrying with it a certainty of spending at least a few months in near companionship with Philida Prothero. But was it a certainty? The manner in which he had introduced the subject argued that I might expect hostility from the gallant Governor of Ponta Rica. In that case it was reasonable to suppose that he would set his face against any intimacy between his daughter and myself. Common sense, therefore, suggested the wisdom of rejecting Ribault's proposal, but, although I confess it with humility, my actions are not always ruled by laws of common sense and prudence and there is a hazard-loving streak in my nature which reacts to the call of the spirited rather than the wiser course. The clash of arms having died into the rather discordant music of peace, the clash of personalities is about the only adventure left in the world. Whether with wits or weapons, I love a good fight, and here, it seemed, was a chance of getting one and the further chance of a big prize, if fortune smiled upon me.

My reflections were broken by old Ribault.

'I know, m'dear, you mean to accept, but I can't for the life of me tell why.'

'No,' I laughed, 'I don't expect you can.'

He rose and thumped me affectionately on the knee.

'The reason doesn't matter as long as you're on our side. If you pull it off, you'll have no cause to complain.'

'I was thinking the same thing myself.'

He looked at me searchingly.

'Got something up your sleeve?'

'No, but there's a magnetic side to your proposition.'

'H'm!' said old Ribault. 'Well, I'll send along a bunch of papers and maps and you can study 'em at your leisure.'

'Right.'

'And when'll you be ready to start?'

'Ah! That's another matter. I'm not going to be hustled.'

'Have it your own way, m'dear. And in the meantime work out a plan of attack.'

'That's a bet. By the way, how far has the Ponta Rica scheme advanced?'

'It hasn't,' said old Ribault curtly.

'So much the better,' said I. 'When I tackle a job, I like to tackle all of it.'

4

As I stepped ashore at Boulogne I saw Marian among the blue-smocked crowd who thronged round the tilted gangway. Marian's smile was like a shout of welcome. It was, so to speak, flooding her features and flowing from the tips of her waving fingers.

'*Salve*,' I cried, after the fashion of the best doormat.

And: 'Bless you,' came back on the *beret* caps of the porters.

A minute later we collided joyously.

'Marshall never meets anybody,' she explained. 'For one thing I wouldn't let him in the clothes he had

on and for another I wanted you all to myself. Oh, I forgot the Customs. Got anything to declare?’

‘My undying affection and about five hundred cigarettes.’

‘All right, I’ll fix it. Leave it to me.’

The way she rattled me through the Customs was a revelation. Every official knew Marian, and the smiles she showered among them saved me the necessity of declaring contraband.

‘The car’s along here,’ she said, ‘and I thought we’d have a cup of tea together and pick up the girls when the hairdresser has done with them.’

‘Girls?’ I repeated.

‘Only three,’ said Marian. ‘The car wouldn’t hold more. There they are. They run a little young this season — but the younger the better when one’s holiday-making.’

She pointed at three mops of hair visible above the lowered hood of a large Sunbeam. Red hair, gold hair, and black hair.

‘Marian,’ said I sternly, ‘can it be that you’re up to your old games again?’

‘I always keep my threats,’ she answered. ‘They’re all agog about meeting you. I’ve put in some heavy propaganda. Hoi! you three! I’ve got the man. Here he is.’

I found myself shaking hands with three of the healthiest, jolliest, most sunburnt girls a man could hope to meet. They were of three distinct types — grave, gay, and bewitching — petite, svelte, and rounded — blue eyes, hazel eyes, and violet eyes. A delicious trio. Intoxicating.

‘This is Nancy Vansiter of Chicago, Illinois,’ said Marian, introducing the tallest — the one with the golden head, the blue eyes, and the smallest nose.

'She's a citizen of the United States of America and is just crazy on tall blond Englishmen with nice moustaches. Aren't you, Nancy?'

The American girl blushed gorgeously and tossed her curls as she put a hand into mine.

'She's a traitor to confidence, Mr. Praed.'

'Marian,' said I, 'is one of the most shameless women alive.'

'Never mind me,' said the object of our criticism. 'Say how d'you do to Joyce Thring, better known as Killarney's Pride. Joyce has the Irish temperament. Her hobbies are bathing, ferreting, falling in love with men she has never met, and watching dog fights.'

The owner of the violet eyes and red hair told me, with a vestige of a brogue, not to believe a word of it.

'It's because I wrote a letter to Douglas Fairbanks that he hadn't the grace to answer she gives me a bad character.'

'And this,' said Marian, 'is Sylvia Westgate, English to the core. She knows more about cricket than any member of the M.C.C. and at present is in love with the memory of W. G. Grace.'

'Don't be so *silly*,' said Sylvia. 'Are you a cricketer, Mr. Praed?'

'Recently I haven't had much of a chance,' I answered, 'though I managed to scratch up a couple of teams among my Congo planters. The game usually ended in a stick fight.'

'Cricket in Central Africa! Isn't that a headliner?' exclaimed young America. 'What a story for the "Post."'

'He must save it up for later,' said Marian. 'Hop in, Nigel. These kids want to be shampooed and shingled while we gossip over a cup of tea.'

Our exquisite cargo was deposited at a hairdresser's,

which done, Marian and I sought refreshment at a pâtisserie.

‘Now,’ said she, ‘let’s have all your news. I know you did wonders out in Africa, so we can cut that part and come to what really matters.’

‘For example?’

‘Yourself — how you are — what you’re going to do next — and what you think and feel?’

‘It’s difficult,’ I said. ‘I haven’t quite got used to being back yet. My notions aren’t sorted out.’

‘You feel a bit dizzy still.’

I nodded.

‘To tell the truth, Marian, I’ve fallen in love.’

‘In love. Not with some awful creature on the Coast?’

‘No. Since landing.’

‘Oh, you treasure!’ she exclaimed. ‘I knew if I hit you quick enough I’d succeed. Which is it?’

‘My dear, it’s nothing to do with your adorable trio.’

Her face fell.

‘Then some one has stolen a march on me and I heartily disapprove of the whole business. Nigel, you idiot, you can’t possibly imagine after five years’ absence from civilization you’re in a fit state to choose a wife.’

‘It hasn’t progressed as far as that,’ said I. ‘Indeed, beyond an hour’s chat in a railway carriage, it hasn’t progressed at all.’

‘A railway carriage — you picked up a strange woman — Really, Nigel!’

‘It was accidental,’ said I. ‘We happened to travel together.’

‘Answer this. Did you invade her carriage or she yours?’

'I don't know about invade — but it was certainly my carriage before she came into it.'

Marian lit a cigarette in disgust.

'A smoker, I presume?'

'Certainly.'

'Who spoke first?'

'Come to think of it ——' I began.

Marian stopped me.

'I won't hear another word. Here have I ransacked the North of France for an eligible selection of healthy, pretty, and really nice girls and you go off the deep end with some minx you pick up in a railway train.'

'Marian,' I said good-naturedly, 'I won't stand it even from you.'

'Of course,' she went on, 'the creature saw the state of mind you were in and gobbled you up under your very nose. Directly I saw you I wondered why you hadn't got that vacuous, hungry look of the exile. You may as well confess the lot. I suppose you lunched together next day and did a matinée and drove her back afterwards to Chiswick and listened sympathetically to a tale of woe — a father who died and left her very badly off — a husband who made life unbearable.'

'Marian, your imagination is running away with you. The girl in question is the daughter of a wealthy soldier holding a high position in the Diplomatic Service. I have never seen her from that day — which is three days ago — to this, and she positively declined to accept my escort from Waterloo Station to Victoria.'

Marian's indignation gave place to relief.

'Oh, come,' she said, 'that's better. With average luck I see no reason why the whole discreditable affair shouldn't blow over and be forgotten.'

'There is only one reason — myself.'

‘You?’

‘Exactly. Have you forgotten that once you described me as the most obstinate man alive?’

‘Pooh! If you were that you wouldn’t be here — you’d be in active pursuit of your adored.’

‘I am.’

‘What?’

‘I took the liberty of reading the labels on her luggage. Her destination is the same as mine. She is stopping at Hardelet.’

Marian’s amazement was so intense and sudden that her fingers shut spasmodically on an éclair she was eating, with the result that a great splotch of cream shot half across the table.

‘Wretch!’ she cried. ‘I’ve never been so insulted in my life. Then you accepted my invitation only to pursue this vulgar courtship?’

‘I came,’ I replied, ‘because I wanted to see you.’

‘A poor lie.’

‘I came because you are the only woman who can really help me.’

‘What’s that?’

I reached across the table and took her sticky hand.

‘My dear — don’t you see I am utterly incapable of winning this campaign without a woman’s aid? With you on my side I am invincible.’

‘Oh,’ said Marian, ‘so that’s the way of it. You want to use me as a cat’s-paw.’

But despite her words the smile was back at the ends of her mouth.

‘Not a cat’s-paw, but as a friend. Fate having denied me the right to ask you to be my wife, the least you can do is help me to find a substitute.’

‘Idiot!’ But she was wavering. ‘I haven’t approved your choice yet. I shall probably think her detestable.’

'I'll take a chance of that.'

An older responsibility reawoke.

'But how about my three musketeers? I promised you would flirt with them a bit.'

'So I will, if you'll do your best for me. I'll flirt with each in turn.'

'Honest Injun!'

I made a gesture of tremendous earnest.

'Very well. I'll see what can be done.'

We shook hands ceremonially.

When we collected the three musketeers at the hair-dresser's Marian addressed them briefly but cryptically.

'It's no use, girls — sorry.'

I do not know what significance lay behind these words, but I know those three sunburnt faces simultaneously assumed a shade of deep and protesting scarlet.

5

It was six o'clock when we arrived at the pine-clad sand dunes of Hardelet. The house before which we pulled up was of white wood and green shutters and boasted a broad veranda upon which, sprawling in deck-chairs or sitting on the baluster rail, were some of the worst-dressed men I have ever seen. Marshall was leaning against a pillar, his thin, gaunt figure gilded by a shaft of falling sunlight. It was interesting to see how the late Attorney-General — the man whose virility in the new empire and business government had excited so much comment, criticism, and admiration from press and public — conducted and arrayed himself when not engaged upon affairs of state. He was hatless and his hair was scattered over his brow — he wore a peasant's smock of brown canvas, and grey flannel

bags far advanced in dilapidation. On his feet, which were innocent of socks, was a pair of string-soled bathing shoes. He was busy when I first saw him fitting strands of elastic to the pouch of a catapult, an operation calling for the use of teeth as well as hands.

'Hallo, you old Poop,' he sang out. 'Come on and make yourself useful. Too busy to shake hands. There's a drink over there — smuggled Bass. These fellows, reading from left to right, are George Frayne who writes rotten short stories and gets overpaid for 'em, Bill Manistry, Frank Mason the railway muddler, and Leland Boas the mystery man. The stout gent with his head wrapped up in a newspaper is old Judge Lowrie, retired. Go on, he'll come to life if you put a match to one of the corners. Well, how are you, Nigel?'

Without waiting for my reply, he turned to Marian.

'Did you get those arrows and the bungi, woman?'

'No, I didn't. I was much too full of other things.'

Marshall threw up his head in an action of despair:

'Who'd be married? What's the use of you, anyway?'

'I remembered them,' said Sylvia, emptying, like a shop thief, a number of arrows and about three yards of catapult elastic from a cretonne parasol.

'H'm,' said Marshall, 'disgraced by a girl in her teens.'

The tall American at my side whispered:

'The way your English husbands bully their wives is surely a scandal.'

I agreed gravely.

'If a husband of mine talked that way I'd tell him where to get off.'

I thanked her for the warning.

'Hurry up,' said Marshall. 'You've just time to change before food.'

'By changing,' Marian explained, 'he means putting on the worst clothes you can find. If you haven't any worse clothes there's a wide selection in one of the attics. The things I have to sit at table beside are enough to make a hostess thoroughly sick.'

'And when you come down,' said Marshall, 'there's an old shrapnel shell to break up and get the bullets out of.'

'Where did you find it?' I asked.

'Picked up on one of the battle-fields a few days ago. We want some catty ammunition, so shake yourself up.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'In the circumstances I think I'll put on evening dress.'

But of course I didn't, for Marshall always gets his own way, and about a quarter of an hour later I was engaged in the hazardous task of defusing and breaking up the outer case of a five-year-old dud .75 and extracting the leaden bullets from within.

'Though why I'm risking my life in this fashion,' said I, 'I don't pretend to understand.'

'You will,' Marshall told me.

After an admirable meal consisting of trout caught by the company, a pâté too delicious to describe, and an omelette cooked as only a Frenchman knows how, his promise was fulfilled.

Packed into three rusty Ford cars, loaded with a variety of outlandish weapons — bows, spears, catapults, lassoes, a bundle of lances, and a sack of half bricks — we rattled away to the forest.

'Of course, if you disapprove of poaching,' Marshall said, 'you'd better not come, but if you're not particular, it's the greatest rag out. We're going to tackle some rides about five miles off. The ground has been surveyed and sport promises well. As you're new to it I'll show you the ropes.'

In my car was Sir William Manistry, the Public Prosecutor, known as Bill; Lord Lowrie, the old judge, now thoroughly awake and behaving like a schoolboy; the American girl, Nancy Vansiter; Marshall, and one of his smaller sons, a black-haired, knotted-browed youngster called Budge. The judge and myself occupied the back seat with Nancy squeezed between us. A very tight fit we made of it, nor was this entirely due to the space at our disposal, but may have been attributable to the youthful tendencies of old Lowrie. As Miss Nancy colloquially expressed it in my private ear:

‘He must have been in the championship class when it came to necking.’

Anyway, we were all young enough and old enough not to despise a bit of hand-holding and pleasant proximity — but to encourage which for what purpose does wind stir the tops of the pines or the autumn moon climb into the bowl of night?

And although I had found young America wise and practical in discussions at the dinner-table, it in no way robbed her of a very proper sentiment for twilight moods which come afterwards.

That five miles was none too long for the pleasure I had of the drive. The same applied to old Judge Lowrie, termagant though he might be in the courts. Miss America treated us generously, sharing her smiles with such impartiality that neither was envious of the other. She could handle a pair as well as a single horse.

As the old judge said:

‘If I were twenty years younger I’d be asking for what now I mean to take.’

And without warning he kissed her very soundly indeed.

She turned to me laughing.

'And how about you,' she said; 'not to be behind-hand and if it comes to that?'

So I gave her that which could not matter to either, and was at least a great delight to one.

'Action front,' cried Marshall. 'Clear decks and man the guns.'

What followed was sheer organized lunacy. The three Ford cars fell into battle line in a circular open space, from which a number of grassy rides radiated like the spokes of a wheel.

'You, Frayne, on the right; we'll take the left, and Boas can have the centre. Toot one, two, three, if you see any sign of keepers.'

'The usual sweepstake on the best bag, I suppose?' said Boas.

'Quids up,' Marshall nodded. 'Every one fit? Right! Man the guns.'

I do not know what dispositions were made by the captains of the other cars, I was too busy carrying out orders from the bridge to notice. Marshall, as Commodore and Chief Engineer in one, remained at the wheel and had appointed himself with a long lance. Bill Manistry, armed with a bow and a quiverful of arrows, had somehow squeezed himself between the engine and the off-side wing. The old judge occupied a position of peril on the rear off-side running board. In his free hand he wielded a sturdy shrimping net with a long handle. Miss America, seated next to Marshall, was in charge of a powerful spot-light, while, fingering a smooth and greasy catapult, I straddled the bonnet.

'Headlights,' shouted Marshall, and simultaneously the three rides before us were lit with the brilliance of day.

'Let her go.'

The crazy adventure began. Madder than any fox

hunt was the pursuit of rabbits and hares on the roaring, rickety Fords through the grassy rides of that old French forest. I did not for a moment anticipate that we should destroy any game, and never was more astonished than when I bowled over a brisk little bunny with a shrapnel bullet behind the ear and heard the old judge's whoop of triumph when he scooped the victim into his net. It then was made clear that I was in the company of experts, for Marshall, who had been in the Lancers during the South African War, impaled a hare with a precision impossible to describe. Bill Manistry, too, was no niggard as an archer; having accounted two direct hits, he rolled off the car to secure the prizes, which done, he chased and caught us as only an old running blue might hope to do. Meanwhile I had another lucky shot, which Judge Lowrie failed to land, a fault which he redeemed by netting a runner without adventitious aid.

As a sport it was without parallel. The scream of the engine, the rush through the night air along those daz- zlingly lit avenues of trees, the scurrying game, the shouts of victory and despair, the idiotic weapons we used — it was terrific, indescribable.

Yes, and Marshall's captaincy, his tremendous seriousness, his navigation of the car, his cursing of our clumsiness, his roars of encouragement at our triumphs. 'Hi-yi-yi! On your left! Sock him — now's your chance! Aah! you thick-headed muddler — you butter-fisted swab! Time it! Time it! Hold tight!' Round a corner with the boy Budge swept off the luggage carrier and dragged hanging to a hot tail-light till he succeeded in scrambling back to his perch. The swish of branches across one's face, and white flurries of startled birds winging across the beam of the headlights, the smell of wet earth and things growing, the

twinkle of stars, the sense of youth — these and all of these made me want to shout aloud joy and gratitude for being alive.

Breathless and exuberant, we were first to arrive at the rendezvous and to inspect the bag.

‘Not too bad,’ Marshall allowed, ‘though if you fellows had kept your heads we should have had another brace. Well, America, what do you think of it all?’

Probably for the first time in her life Nancy Vansiter was at a loss for words.

‘You bunch of kids!’ was the best she could manage. ‘And the electors put men like you in charge of the country!’

A second later the other cars came rattling up to a standstill.

‘What’s doing?’ shouted Frayne.

‘Seven,’ Bill Manistry shouted back.

‘Oh!’ came through the darkness in an Irish brogue, ‘to be beaten by one.’

‘What’s yours, Boas?’

Leland Boas, his remarkably handsome face lit up by one of our side-lamps, shook his head.

‘We were unlucky — only three.’

‘It was his driving,’ protested Sylvia Westgate with a pout of indignation. ‘He wouldn’t go all out — spoilt our chances.’

Boas gave what to me was an unpleasant little laugh, though the smile that accompanied it was a pattern of geniality.

‘Dear Miss Sylvia, I prefer to lose a few rabbits and hares rather than jeopardize such precious lives.’

‘Rot!’ said the girl, ‘a game’s a game.’

‘Stow quarrelling, you two,’ from Marshall, ‘and pay up like a man, Boas.’

'Toss you double or quits.'

'No, you won't. One can do that in an English pub. In this game the man who loses pays.'

Marshall had the sort of courage that is always willing to expose itself to the risk of being misunderstood. His philosophy did not admit second chances. If you lost, you lost.

There was a flicker of patronage in Boas's face as he fished out his note-case. For that, if for no other cause, I disliked the man. He was not, to my mind, in the same class with the others. Against their sturdy likeness to a pack of hounds he suggested a sleek, solitary cat. Then again, he was much too good-looking to pass an ordinary male standard. He was dark, olive-skinned, and aquiline. His hands were absurdly small and white. His figure was perfect — broad shoulders and very narrow hips — the Tango figure. But for the perfect English he spoke I should have put him down as coming from Central Europe, with perhaps a dash of the Orient thrown in. Marshall had told me he had spent several years in East Africa, but when I had tackled him on the subject he had shown little inclination to discuss it. Indeed, throughout dinner I had found his manner tiresome and patronizing, and I liked him no more on better acquaintance. He was one of those elegant lizard-like men that set up an itch in the toes of one's boots.

The others paid up good-humouredly, and I found myself richer by two pounds sterling and a memorable experience.

Meanwhile, the boy Budge and the girl Sylvia had drifted off arm-in-arm down one of the forest glades. It appeared that she had things to say on the matter of sporting observances which his public-school experience fitted him to hear. Of course, Marian had im-

ported Sylvia as a possible life partner for me, and there is little doubt, had we two been of the same mind, she would have fitted the part with distinction. This fact notwithstanding, she was still young enough not to despise the company of a boy in his teens. The glimpse I had of them by the light of the moon revealed two young people with arms about each other's necks in a very proper and lover-like fashion.

A much-needed bottle of Bass was issued to the troops before the homeward journey. There was a shuffle-up of passengers, and I found myself next to Boas, with Marshall in the seat behind.

'We'll pack those youngsters in here if we ever find 'em,' he said. 'Any one know which way they went?'

Rather traitorously I pointed out the path.

'Buzz along, Boas, there's just room for a car, but mind the ditch on the left.'

It was a narrow lane we followed, better suited to lovers than motorists. Brambles tugged at our sleeves, and the cool leaves of low-hanging branches brushed against our faces. The going was bumpy and uneven, which possibly explains why the headlights suddenly went out, leaving us with nothing but a miserable pair of oil side-lamps to light the way.

'It widens a quarter of a mile farther on,' said Marshall, 'and we'll have the moon for the ride home.'

Possibly Boas had been offended by the reproaches of Sylvia on the subject of his driving, and sought to recover his reputation by putting on speed under difficulties. Certainly he rattled the Ford along faster than was wise or comfortable. To the injunction to take it easy he replied:

'It's all right, I can see better in the dark. Oh, by the way, Sir Marshall, that Prothero girl is staying at La Rosa.'

'Prothero girl?' Marshall repeated.

'Francis Prothero's daughter, from Ponta Rica.'

'Ah, yes — never met her. What of it?'

'We happened to run into one another this morning. Talking of that, what are the Government planning to do with Ponta Rica, assuming they are returned to office?'

'Nothing decided.'

'They'll never be crazy enough to try and fortify the island. Germany realized the hopelessness of that.'

'So I believe.'

'And you'll never build a harbour there.'

'That so?'

'From a naval and military point of view the island isn't worth a second-class cruiser or a platoon of Territorials.'

'Why of Territorials?' said Marshall sharply. He had seen service in a Territorial division, and held their honour second to none.

'Figure of speech.'

'H'm.'

'The only future for the place is in real estate.'

'Think so?'

'I was there for three months last winter, and had an opportunity for judging. Turn it into a huge hydro-pathic — a smart winter resort — and there's a fortune in the place. Why let Biarritz and the Côte d'Azur swallow up enormous sums of English gold year after year without competition?'

I was listening too attentively to pay heed to the fact that we were swinging round a corner. At a warning cry I turned sharply and saw, a couple of yards in front of us, three shadowy figures. At the spot where this happened a ruinous old wall flanked the right side of the track, while on the left was a kind of moat, black and shiny with water.

Boas must have seen the figures at the same instant. The car was going too fast to stop in its own length, and the track was too narrow to pass. It was a choice between running them down or taking the ditch. As the former course would certainly result in some one being severely hurt, I had no doubt Boas would choose the latter. But I was wrong. If any one was to suffer it would not be himself.

With a cry of 'Jump!' he drove straight at them. He must have known they would have no time to get out of harm's way, for they were on the wall side, and they would never have reached the ditch before the car was upon them. There was a fraction of a second for me to seize the wheel and lock hard over. Followed a slither, a jar, a sense of having taken wings, and the three of us splashed down into a mess of mud and weeds, with the car overshadowing us like a picture on a wall.

6

BOAS was the first to struggle out and get back to the path. He was cursing fluently until a girl's voice, which I instantly recognized as Philida Prothero's, said:

'That was awfully sporting of you. Why, it's Mr. Boas. I hope no one is hurt. It was a plucky thing to do.'

'Not at all,' he said — then, over a shoulder to me — 'You shouldn't have grabbed the wheel, Praed, you nearly made me run them down.'

I was busy at the time, putting Marshall the right way up, and that was perhaps just as well. Life on the Congo induces a man to act hastily. If Boas had been within reach I should have hit without argument. Indeed, I was making my moist way towards him when

Marshall — now restored to the perpendicular — closed a warning hand on my arm. He was right. There was time to deal with that situation later on.

I scrambled up the bank, squeezed some of the water out of my sleeves, and shook hands with Philida.

‘It’s my travelling companion,’ she said, with real surprise. ‘What are you doing in Hardelet?’

‘Keeping a promise. I told you I was coming here for the bathing.’

She laughed.

‘Is that why you grabbed the wheel?’

‘It was the thought of a high dive, Miss Prothero. I always prefer to go in by the steps. My friend Boas has a natural disregard for danger which I envy.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Boas generously. ‘Perhaps you didn’t see any one in the path.’

‘Oh, yes, I did.’

In the meantime Marshall was good-naturedly ragging Budge and Sylvia for landing us in the ditch.

‘If you young folks didn’t find it necessary to walk for miles to do your sweethearting, I shouldn’t have lost a motor-car that must be worth at least thirty-five shillings. Anyway, it’s no use hanging about here. Let’s make for the highroad and see if the others have waited. Some one introduce me to this young lady who wanders about forests in the dead of night.’

Boas made the introduction.

‘And, oddly enough, Miss Prothero, we were talking about you when the accident happened.’

‘Then perhaps it was my fault in more ways than one,’ she answered, ‘though there’s a bright side, because if we hadn’t met I should certainly have spent the night here. I’d lost my way.’

‘That being so,’ said Boas, with oppressive gallantry, ‘we are more than rewarded. Come, this is the path.’

He would have hurried her off, but Marshall took his arm.

'Let the kids act as pilot,' he said. 'There's something I want to say to you. Praed, look after Miss Prothero.'

No doubt this arrangement was disagreeable to Boas, but Marshall's methods are persuasive — and, after all, he was our host.

Thus I found myself, with a great deal to say and no aptitude for saying it, walking beside Philida Prothero in a primeval forest. With the mercilessness of her sex, she made no effort to help me, and for a hundred yards we marched in silence.

At last I said:

'It was odd running into you like that.'

'But you didn't.'

'Ah, but that was no fault of mine.'

She laughed.

'Tell me, do they drive a Juggernaut car in the part of the world you come from?'

Evidently she did not mean to spare me for what, naturally enough, must have seemed an act of pure callousness.

'Human life is not valued very highly out there,' I replied. 'I suppose one gets into the way of disregarding it.'

She looked at me critically.

'And self-preservation comes first, doesn't it?'

'With some of us.'

We fell upon another silence. It was broken by a little chuckle from Philida and the touch of her hand on my dripping sleeve.

'Come,' she said, 'it isn't fair, though I couldn't resist the curiosity of finding out how you'd stand the test.'

'The test?'

'Yes. No man cares to be put in the wrong when he can put himself right by a word.'

'I don't follow you.'

'It's simple enough. I like you for it, Nigel Praed, because I'm certain you've rather a rigid public-school conception of playing the game.'

'What game?'

'Not squealing if you're hurt, and not making a scene in public, and not taking jolly good care to have the highest plinth to stand on. Don't look so blank. I know perfectly well which way you pulled that wheel. The moon was shining.'

Her words were an enormous relief. What she had said was true enough, for although I deserved no credit for doing what ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done in similar circumstances, I viewed with melancholy the thought of appearing before her as one who had tried to save his skin at the expense of another's.

It may have been relief made me take a more generous view of what had happened.

'I expect Boas meant to pull my leg.'

'Not on your life,' said Philida. 'His humour doesn't run along those lines. Leland Boas has a very particular reason for all he says and does. At present he'd strain heaven and earth to be on amicable terms with me.'

'So would I, if it comes to that.'

'You're well placed, if that's any satisfaction,' said she; 'but his reasons are influenced by ambition.'

My own coming under a similar influence, I said nothing and felt angry.

'Leland Boas has a Ponta Rica scheme and wants to keep in with the Government House set. He was

ground-baiting the pitch last winter, and, unless I'm mistaken, he's up to something of the same kind now.'

'Before you say another word, Miss Prothero,' I interrupted, 'would you think less of a man if, through happening to know you, he was able to take a short cut in an undertaking upon which he was engaged?'

'Not necessarily, although if a man cultivated me on the off-chance that I might be useful, I shouldn't rank him very high. Why ask?'

'A lot depends on your answer. By a fluke I've been offered a job which, unless I turn it down, will take me to Ponta Rica, and which the accident of knowing you might help me to carry through successfully.'

'Is this true?'

'Perfectly.'

'What kind of job ——'

'Commercial, but perfectly honest. I cannot say more.'

'And you're coming to Ponta Rica?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'Your answer, of course.'

'And once there you'll rely on my help?'

'On the contrary, I shall refuse it.'

'I see. You'd tackle the job in spite of me.'

I laughed.

'That's an awkward way of putting it. I've cheek enough to hope you'll let me see you a great deal — but I certainly don't intend to make any use of you.'

'I might offer.'

I shook my head.

'Perhaps you think I wouldn't be any use.'

'That's the danger. In the initial stages you would be invaluable.'

'What are the initial stages?'

'Consent.'

She thought for a while, then clapped her hands together.

'Is it one of those schemes that father has to sanction?'

I nodded.

'Then why on earth won't you let me help? I've only to tell him he'd make a great mistake to agree to anything of the kind and he'd be certain to agree.'

'And then,' said I, 'you would have done the work and I should take the pay. Sorry, but I'd rather leave that hand to Leland Boas.'

She made a melodramatic gesture.

'After all, you saved my life from the wheels of a Ford. The least you can do is to allow me to repay.'

'You are an idiot,' I laughed. And from this discourteous remark arose, I believe, that something more than friendship which sprang to life between us.

The path ended abruptly, and we found ourselves on a white highroad with, a hundred yards away, the twinkling red tail-light of a waiting car.

'It's Mums,' shouted the boy Budge over his shoulder. 'She always senses if an accident has happened. Coo-ee, Mums!'

Sure enough, it was Marian, drawn into the forest by a feminine intuition that things were amiss. In response to Budge's cry she came down the road to meet us.

'I knew it,' she said. 'I felt instinctively something had gone wrong. Who's been killed or murdered? Is everybody safe, or is any one missing?'

'All present and correct, Mums. In fact, we're one over establishment,' said Budge with a gesture towards Philida.

‘Good Heavens, Nigel! What have you been up to? Why, you’re smothered in mud and weed.’

‘That’s all right,’ I answered. ‘We happened to meet this lady in the wood.’

‘In a wood! It looks as if you’d dragged a pond for her.’

‘It was to avoid the shock of meeting me they drove into the pond, Lady Livesay,’ Philida laughed.

‘I don’t understand a word; you’d better introduce me.’

‘This is Miss Philida Prothero.’

Marian gasped.

‘Lord!’ she exclaimed, ‘you haven’t lost much time.’

I cleared my throat noisily, but not noisily enough to prevent Philida from saying:

‘What *do* you mean by that?’

‘My dear — this creature arrives to-day full of tales of a beautiful travelling companion met in a railway train, and behold, six hours later he appears walking beside her in a forest. If that isn’t quick work, what is?’

Philida looked at me gravely.

‘Do I understand,’ she asked, ‘that I have been the subject of conversation between you and your friends?’

‘Certainly,’ I replied without shame, ‘and why not? I always tell Marian all that happens to me.’

‘So he does,’ said Marian. ‘He was full of you. Indeed, he gave me to understand he would gladly go through fire and water for you. By the look of him he seems to have proved half his words.’

Marian was moving things along a trifle fast. This being so, I suggested that, having regard to the water, it would be agreeable to approach the ordeal of fire, and get into some dry clothes. Philida’s composure was not so easily shattered.

'Is all this some form of elaborate joke, Lady Live-say?' she asked.

'Joke? Heavens, no! Why, I found him three perfect girls and he wouldn't look at one of them!'

'That,' I said, 'is not altogether true.'

'Well, you know what I mean.'

'Hi! you three,' shouted Marshall from the car, which he and the rest had already occupied; 'are you going to stop there talking all night while we perish of cold?'

'Is he wet, too?' demanded Marian, for Marshall had dodged her in passing.

'Sopping,' said I.

'Wretch, not to have told me!' and she started for the car at a run.

'What an amazing and adorable creature,' said Philida; 'but can you explain what she was talking about?'

'I can.'

'Well?'

'It speaks for itself.'

'What does?'

I took a breath.

'I'm in love with you.'

I don't know what I expected. Perhaps that she would laugh — be angry — offended. She was none of these.

'But love is such a very serious thing.'

I shook my head.

'No; death is serious — and work, and ambition, and friendship. Love is quite by itself.'

'Do you think you know me well enough to have said it?'

'If I know you well enough to have felt it, why not?'

'I suppose that's true,' she said, 'and certainly it's brave.'

By which time we had arrived at the car.

7

It was a tradition in Marshall's household to have dressing-gown parties before retiring for the night. Marian, who, despite Marshall's brusqueness and intense masculinity, always treated him as though he were a child in arms, was in the habit of brewing cocoa over a methyated spirit stove in her bedroom as a final night-cap. To these orgies favoured guests were sometimes invited. For my own part, I did not wait to be asked. I had known them upwards of fifteen years, and claimed the privilege of long-standing friendship. Also, I liked Marian's cocoa — and liked the intimacy of the talk it somehow inspired. Marshall, too, was a different man in these moments. He dropped his harrying, high-handed manner and behaved towards his wife like an adoring schoolboy — sitting at her side on the little couch at the bed-side with an arm round her shoulders, or possessing himself of her hands in a manner that greatly impeded her operations.

'Why not let the woman get on with her cooking?' I said, dropping into a squeaky basket-work chair.

'My good fool,' he replied, 'this is part of the technique of living. If I didn't make a fuss of her sometimes, she wouldn't stop with me a day. Haven't you read your Deardon?'

'He believes it solemnly,' said Marian, stirring the broth with her free hand. Then added: 'It's true, too — I shouldn't.'

As into a crystal she gazed into the cocoa for enlightenment.

'Every woman likes to be made love to, even if it's only by a clumsy husband who kids himself he's doing her a good turn.'

Marshall flung away her captured hand.

'Trash, that's what you are, Marian, just trash. Take stock, Nigel, of the kind of stuff women are made of, and thank your lucky stars you're free of them.'

But I was of a different mind. Envy and longing filled me — envy of the happy, devoted, critical, insolent intimacy of these two people; longing that, in the fullness of time, some such similar state of being might be mine.

'Until he has a woman to turn him inside out and prick and goad and startle him out of himself, a man isn't of much account,' said I. 'A man on his own thinks he knows all about himself until the woman proves he has everything to learn.'

'Sweet,' said Marian.

Marshall looked at me in horror.

'For mercy's sake, don't let her hear you talk like that,' he implored. 'If you're ever unlucky enough to be caught, keep that sort of knowledge to yourself. Once let a woman believe she is of the smallest value, and life's impossible. The only way to peace is by keeping 'em ashamed of 'emselves. Here, Marian, when's that filthy concoction of yours going to be ready?'

Marian gave him his cocoa before serving me. She helped him first because he came first.

'If Marshall were not a mental deficient,' she said, 'he'd realize that his advice comes a little too late — eh, Nigel?'

I made no reply. Marshall sat up.

'What's this?'

I nodded.

'Fraid so, old chap.'

In his surprise Marshall spilled a pool of cocoa on his dressing-gown.

'Not truly? How awful! Who's the victim?'

'He didn't notice — never notices anything. Isn't it pathetic?' said Marian. 'Yet that's how governments are made.'

'It's a providence,' said I, 'that every great man has a greater woman at the back of him.'

Marian favoured me with a beam of approval.

'Nigel, I really believe you will go far, and as a reward I'll say the girl is delightful. She has the sensiblist eyes I have ever seen, and a mouth that simply breathes determination.'

'Has he fallen for the principal of a girls' school?'

Marian ignored Marshall's interruption.

'And that's not all. She's lovable, too, without which the rest isn't worth two-penn'orth of gin.'

I suppose I looked uncomfortable, for Marian went on with a hand over one of mine:

'A woman can be as wise as an owl — as funny as "Punch" — as straight as the Monument, but unless she has a head which will fit into a man's shoulder, she might as well never have been born.'

And to prove her words, Marian nuzzled her curly head against Marshall's cheek in such a wise as caused him to kiss her ear before he pushed her rudely away and bade her sit on the floor and not behave like a 'damned kitten.'

'And now,' he said, 'perhaps you'll tell me who this poor stiff has been captured by.'

'Philida Prothero, of course.'

Marshall sat up and whistled.

'Look here,' said I, 'all this is indecently premature. I confess I — well, as far as I'm concerned, I — but as she ——'

'Admirably expressed,' said Marshall. 'What's it mean?'

'Oh, that's quite all right,' from Marian. 'If she

hadn't felt the same for you as you feel for her, she'd have snubbed me dreadfully for the way I behaved.'

This was good news — a little technical for male understanding, perhaps, but nevertheless, good news.

Marian went on:

'You may have thought my methods a little express, but as your friend I had to determine quickly.'

I murmured that I had noticed something of the kind, and from any one else should have resented it.

'Ah, but, Nigel, I had the girls to consider. If I had seen that your suit was hopeless and your choice inadequate, I should have summoned my artillery to put down a barrage, and sent in Joyce or one of the others to carry out a frontal attack. With those Irish eyes of hers, you would be certain to have succumbed sooner or later.'

'But in the circumstances?' I queried.

'It won't be necessary. All you have to do is walk in and win.'

'If for one moment you would stop talking,' said Marshall, 'I have something to say. It's very well to talk of walking in and winning, but you, my boy, are not the only one that walks in that direction.'

'Meaning?'

'Our friend Boas.'

'Oh, him!' I said with a sniff.

'Wait a bit. It's not quite such easy going. Boas has her father's consent to ask the girl to marry him.'

I frowned.

'He told you?'

Marshall nodded.

'H'm! It struck me he must have some kind of drag on the old man. He's a fishy beggar.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'although he doesn't take to water as readily as some of the species.'

Marshall laughed.

'That's a good one. I fancy you may expect an apology. He explained to me that your action in ditching the car was a fraction of a second ahead of his own intention to do so.'

'That will never be known,' said I. 'Anyway, it doesn't much matter, though he ain't the sort I'd expect to find you entertaining.'

'My dear boy, even on a holiday we Government blokes can't escape all our responsibilities. I'm looking him over, though he doesn't know it; and in the meantime he's looking me over, and I do know it.'

'This Ponta Rica business?'

Marshall looked up, startled.

'How did you know?'

I explained, also, my own interest in the island.

'That's queer.'

'But what's he want with you?'

'You heard what he said in the car — just that. He's the boss of a big syndicate that wants to turn the island into a rival Monte Carlo. We've known of it for some time.'

'But he approached the subject just conversationally.'

'Because he thought that in that mood I might be more easily drawn into expressing the Government's views.'

'And what are the Government's views?'

'Rather divided. There's a lot to be said for the scheme. The island, as it is, is a pure white elephant — that costs a lot in forage.'

'Does it mean selling the island to a company?'

'Not altogether. It means selling part of the existing town — the shoreland part, which at present is occupied by the dregs of humanity. When we took

over after the peace treaty the inhabitants were given five years to make other domiciliary arrangements. That is to say, the Public Trustee forecloses on the whole property.'

'It sounds high-handed,' said I.

Marshall shrugged his shoulders.

'It was only cleaning up a sink, after all.'

'How much ground is there?'

'Roughly, a square half-mile.'

'And it's coming under the hammer?'

'More or less. It's in the hands of the custodians of ex-enemy property. Provided a reasonable scheme is put up that will bring in a bit of revenue, we shan't have much to say in the matter. It's mainly up to the Governor. He's the decisive factor.'

'But does the Government favour the notion?'

'If the new Gaming Act comes into force I think they'd welcome it. Why not?'

'H'm!' said I, 'a square half-mile in the shoreland part of the town. Yes, that's interesting.'

'It sounds terribly dull to me,' said Marian with a yawn, for when conversation lapsed from persons to things Marian's interest languished. I took the hint and bade them good-night. Passing down the bedroom corridor, I saw the door of Boas's room was open.

'Oh, Praed,' he said, 'come in a minute.'

'Yes?' I queried.

'I'm afraid I was rather rude to you to-night.'

'I didn't notice it.'

'About catching hold of the wheel. I dare say in the haste of the moment I misinterpreted your motive.'

'In suggesting I acted as a coward.'

'My dear fellow, no question of that. Good Heavens ——'

'It's really not worth bothering about, Boas,' I said.

'Nobody else was under any misapprehension. You forget the moon was out.'

He looked at me sharply, opened his mouth, and closed it again.

'You realize, of course, that I fully intended to take the ditch.'

I didn't realize it — in fact, I knew his words were untrue. That is why I replied:

'You hadn't much choice.'

I saw his face go white and the muscles of his hands tighten.

'My dear fellow,' he said, 'I apologize. I would not rob you of the natural self-esteem your gallantry has inspired. Good-night.'

He used his foil adroitly. It pricked me on the raw. I stood a moment looking at him in silence.

'Some men,' I said, 'get on in the world by words, but they are easy things to trip over, Boas.'

'Good-night,' he said again.

8

ON our return from the forest overnight we had dropped Philida Prothero at the gates of the Villa Rosa, a residence rented for the summer months by a Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter. Thither the following morning, at Marian's suggestion and Philida's invitation, I went to present my compliments.

Mrs. Hunter — or, rather, Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, for the lady had experimented in two husbands, and at the decease of the second had compacted his name with that of the first — was, I had learnt from Philida, the society leader of Ponta Rica.

I had judged from Philida's casual tone that she did not possess a very great liking for her hostess.

'She has an innocent way of getting into people's confidence by an air of sheer stupidity and then being quite venomous about them. Father likes her and says she's a great asset, so I couldn't very well refuse her invitation. Come along and be introduced.'

I went, in flannels, with a bathing-suit twisted up in a towel and hanging round my neck like a priest's stole.

Philida was in the precise little garden of the villa, practising a forehand drive against a side wall. I stopped to watch the lithe ease of her movements and the steady timing of hand and eye. I think she must have felt my presence even as in the railway carriage she felt my oafish stare through the paper which concealed her. She stopped her practice and turned to look at me.

'Morning, Philida,' said I.

'Morning, Nigel.'

This was the first time we had called each other by Christian names. I felt the greeting was a happy omen.

'I wondered if you would come,' she said.

'You must have known I should.'

'Perhaps. I shouldn't have been surprised, though, if you hadn't.'

'How so?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'You were a little ahead of yourself last night. Sometimes people feel different in the light of day. I've been thinking it over, and it seems to me you were rather thrust into making that declaration. Lady Livesay's attack was overwhelming.'

'Marian is my friend,' said I, 'and I worship the ground she walks on, but friendship has never persuaded me to say what I did not want to say or do what I did not want to do.'

'That's conceit,' said Philida, 'but not of a bad kind.'

Tell me, did conceit lead you into a row with Mr. Boas last night?’

‘We had a word or two — but conceit was not the cause of it.’

‘What then?’

‘I didn’t like the idea of him making up to you.’

‘Chivalry?’

‘No — just plain, straightforward jealousy.’

She regarded me thoughtfully, spinning the tennis racket this way and that on the toe of her canvas shoe.

‘I like your sort of compliments, Nigel. There’s a schoolboy frankness about them that’s jolly. I like you, too. Tell me some more about that jealous feeling.’

‘It’s this way. If I like any one I never can resist believing I have a right to punch the head of any one who likes them too.’

She frowned.

‘That’s proprietorial. I don’t know whether I approve. And yet,’ she added, ‘if one liked a man and he was not proprietorial I suppose one wouldn’t like him for very long. Up to the present I’ve always resented the idea of any sort of control. I’ve mostly done for myself, and it seemed such infernal impertinence for any one to interfere. I haven’t liked commanding personalities.’

‘Heaven knows I haven’t that.’

‘It’s impossible for you to judge. A woman isn’t conscripted into any kind of subordination. She enlists into it voluntarily.’

This was a trifle subtle for me, so I said nothing. She went on:

‘I’m a tremendous believer in people being self-contained — until something happens to them.’

I came a step nearer, but with a straight arm she put her tennis racket on my chest and held it there.

'It would be frightfully absurd if that something had already happened — through you. After all, why should it?'

There was no answer, or if there was I lacked the intelligence to find it.

'I don't see what I'm to do about it — do you?'

Then I said:

'Philida — can't you trust your instinct?'

'I'd like to,' she nodded, 'but I'm kind o' skeered, as the Americans say.'

'Scared of what?'

'Scared of anything that comes too soon — scared of a walk-over. You see, here are we two who've shared a few perfectly trivial talks, and at the third we're looking into tremendousness. Don't you see it can't be right? It's too small a plank to jump from into such deep water.'

'I know what you feel,' I said. 'In a way perhaps you're right. Yet I love you, Philida. I want you to marry me as I've never wanted anything before. But I, too, would like to have some rivers to cross and a mountain to climb. I'd like to go through a fire to reach you and a regiment to bring you back. But modern life cheats us of these things, the prize is for the taking, not the winning. If you come to me you walk to me and I to you. Nobody'll bother to stop us or put dangers in the way. Prizes are given without worth being proved. It's a rotten state, but I love you and that's the best I can offer.'

She had dropped her racket and her splendid, steady eyes were firm on mine.

'That's a knight's speech,' she said, 'and I love you for it, Nigel, because I believe you meant every word.'

She turned away and kicked at a tuft of grass. When next she spoke she had forced her voice into a conventional key.

‘But don’t let’s be in a hurry like greedy children stuffing cakes at a party. Let’s be ordinary and wait and see.’

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘After all, you know nothing about me as yet.’

She gave a little shrug.

‘As if that mattered. Not a bit. You matter only as you matter to me. It’s not a case of credentials, Nigel!’

‘Then of what?’

‘I’ve always been this way where feelings were concerned. I run from them rather than towards them. For fear they would spoil the idea I have formed of them, I’ve bolted — and hidden myself — and digested what little I had rather than look for more. That — that’s my way. I had a nurse once, years and years ago. She came and I adored her at first sight, and because of that — because I was afraid if she knew it she’d be careless and spoil things — I went into a kind of solitary confinement of heart and stopped there with my eyes shut.’ She looked up. ‘I haven’t improved much since childhood.’

‘Didn’t the nurse take you in her arms and shake you?’

‘I should have hated her if she had, so don’t try it, Nigel.’

‘One day I shall. If not now — one day.’

‘All right, one day — but for now I’ve such heaps to go on with.’

And though I longed to smother her with kisses, I forbore, as it seemed to me an untouched bloom of purity covered her from head to toe.

‘Then how about two hard sets and a bathe?’

She looked up gratefully.

‘You’re just the man I’d wish you to be.’

We had finished our second set, in which I was most wholesomely beaten, when a tall lady under the brightest of bright parasols came through the wire doorway into the court. She was wearing a striped linen frock of vivid orange and black, like the awning of Basque antipe. About her neck, which was sinuous and columnar and must in her prime have been of gracious line, were strings and strings of jade beads. Her hat was of some subtle shade of cinnamon which contrasted, to my mind painfully, with hair the colour of a Victoria plum. Her face, which boasted good features, was carefully prepared with a groundwork of chalky white, her high cheekbones and the point of her chin being picked out with dabs of Chinese lantern pink. A certain nobility of carriage and grace of movement, particularly in the disposition of her hands, which glittered with rings, rescued her appearance from the charge of being grotesque.

I decided at my first quick estimate that Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter was funny without being vulgar — was exaggerated but not entirely ridiculous.

Her manner of approach was so smooth as almost to suggest skating. Indeed, I should not have been surprised if, through lack of a brake, she had gone right past me and run into the wire fence surrounding the court. This, however, did not befall, for motion ceased as she came abreast of Philida.

‘My dear,’ she said, ‘how rash to be in the sun without a hat! Apart from danger of a stroke there is the greater danger to one’s complexion.’

Philida said nothing, which later I found out was her usual reply. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter did not require aid in the matter of conversation. She did her own

talking, having little or no interest in the remarks of others.

‘And who,’ she asked, ‘might this young gentleman be? I don’t think we’ve met — no — but I dare say you’ve mentioned his name and I’ve forgotten it.’

‘This is Mr. Nigel Praed.’

She repeated the name Praed as if to determine what it tasted like.

‘There are no Praeds that I can remember, although I suppose there must have been Praeds, or Praed Street would never have been so called. However, that hardly matters.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Philida. ‘It’s pleasant for him to get his origin sorted out. Perhaps the name is assumed.’

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter reproved her with a touch.

‘You see,’ she explained, ‘I’ve travelled a great deal, Mr. Praed, and abroad one meets more or less every one.’

I bowed. It was the only thing to do.

‘My husband, General Hunter, was in India for a number of years, and we were very much in with the Viceregal set. Although, of course,’ she added, ‘that was before Lord Reading’s time. Then naturally, my husband, the Count Huerta Nuñez, being in the diplomatic service, one met a number of people. You would not have been to Sevilla — no — Our house overlooked the Alcazar.’

‘I have heard,’ I said gravely, ‘they entertain a great many visitors there.’

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter looked at me in pity.

‘The Alcazar is no longer a residence, but a show place for tourists.’

I affected contrition for my ignorance.

‘Travel,’ she added, ‘is a great broadener of the mind.’

I think Philida had had as much of this as she could stand. She said:

‘Mr. Praed has been all over the world. He came back from the Congo only a few days ago.’

‘The Congo! What a very strange place to select. There is practically no society there but more or less degenerate Belgians and persons on remittance. Now, in South Africa —— But I don’t suppose you would know Cape Town.’

‘But casually,’ I replied. ‘I was there at the end of the Boer War, and later for a few days which I mostly spent dragging round the docks looking for a steamer to work a passage home in.’

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter looked at me with a quick, searching glance, but it was long enough to prove that she was not entirely the vapid colonial society snob her conversation suggested. Underlying the veneer was a certain shrewdness and comprehension of other people’s minds. I realized that she was not deceived by my apparent stupidity.

‘In those circumstances,’ she said coldly, ‘you would not have met the people with whom I was acquainted. No.’ Then, turning to Philida as though I no longer existed: ‘Make haste, dear, and get ready. Mr. Boas will be calling in his car in half an hour.’

I did not mean to allow myself to be swept aside.

‘Miss Prothero,’ I said, ‘has promised to join me in a bathe.’

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter did not even look at me.

‘No,’ she said with simple finality.

It was then Philida showed the stuff she was made of.

‘I shan’t be two minutes. Entertain Mrs. Hunter till I come down.’

She ran into the house, leaving us alone.

It was evident that opposition was highly disagreeable to the lady, and she looked at me as though in expectation that I should withdraw my claim. I, however, made no such move, but instead remarked how exceedingly fortunate we were in the matter of weather. The subject was briefly short-circuited by the pronouncement:

‘In Northern Europe there is no weather.’

‘One generally hears there is too much,’ I replied breezily.

‘There is only too much talk about it, Mr. Praed. I have not been informed how you and Miss Prothero came to be acquainted.’

‘We met in a railway carriage.’

She shivered.

‘That is hardly an introduction.’

‘But it was from Salisbury to Waterloo,’ I pleaded. ‘Quite a respectable line — very different from the Southend-Fenchurch Street service.’

‘You are pleased to be humorous, but for my part I can see nothing funny in the affair.’

‘Nor I, Mrs. Hunter. I can see only a matter for self-congratulation.’

There was a silent interval — then:

‘You may not be aware that Philida is the daughter of General Sir Francis Prothero, the Military Governor of Ponta Rica.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ I said. ‘I am hoping to make his acquaintance before long.’

‘That is hardly likely. The General rarely leaves the island.’

‘At the island,’ I amended.

‘You are then proposing to visit ——’

‘Almost at once.’

‘I am afraid there is little at Ponta Rica to amuse you.’

'I shall have my work.'

'Your work?' She looked at me critically. 'And that is?'

'Unhappily I am not in a position to discuss it.'

It was clear she was not accustomed to refusal.

'There is very little mercantile marine at Ponta Rica,' she said.

I laughed, for I enjoy good scoring, even against myself. This was evidently a riposte to my ill-timed jest about the Cape Town docks.

'The General, Mr. Praed, is most particular as to his daughter's friends. You will understand that Philida's position on the island is very different from the position she adopts when travelling. Practically, since the General's wife is dead, Philida is Her Excellency.'

'She is indeed,' I agreed.

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter frowned agedly under her paint.

'Although nothing is actually announced, the General favours a union between Philida and Mr. Leland Boas.'

Before that my good-humour broke down.

'Mrs. Hunter,' I said, 'if nothing has been announced, are you justified in informing a complete stranger of so intimate a fact?'

'Young man,' she exclaimed, 'you are impertinent.'

'In that case I apologize; but I felt that our acquaintance was too short to entitle me to a confidence which even Miss Philida herself has not been asked to share.'

That one fairly sent the bails flying.

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter rose and dug her parasol into the ground.

'I gave you the information, Mr. Praed, in the hope you would have the grace to act accordingly — in other words, to retire.'

'Retire from what, Mrs. Hunter?'

'From where your attentions can only be regarded as unwelcome.'

'But why do you imagine I have attempted to advance?'

'An hour ago you and Philida were talking in the garden.'

'Well?'

Her reply came calmly.

'My bathroom adjoins that part of the garden.'

She made the announcement without shame as though eavesdropping were at once the most natural and creditable of occupations.

I picked up my towel from the chair-back over which it had been thrown.

'In that case you know my sentiments as well as I know them myself.'

'I shall feel it my duty to write, informing the General of what has taken place.'

'Why bother?' I said. 'Very shortly I shall be doing that myself.'

'If you imagine for a moment that he is likely to consent ——'

'I shall not ask him. There is only one person's consent necessary in a matter of that kind.'

'We shall see.'

Philida's voice sounded from the veranda.

'Ready!'

I took my leave, ceremoniously bowing over an extended hand which Mrs. Hunter ignored.

'What's up?' said Philida as we marched down the road. 'You look different — excited — pleased about something — war-horsey!'

'Rivers to cross,' I answered. 'Perhaps even a small Everest to climb — who knows?'

'Can't you be less symbolic?' she pleaded.

'Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter has declared war. It appears accidentally she overheard us talking through her bathroom window.'

Philida's mouth shut tight on a long silence. Presently she said:

'Accidentally! She had her bath before you arrived.' I was not surprised.

'What's going to happen?'

'A letter to your father to-night.'

'That'll cheer things up.'

'Did you know,' I asked, 'that he has given his consent to Leland Boas to become engaged to you?'

She stopped short.

'Father has?'

I nodded.

'How do you know?'

I gave my source of information.

'That's merely silly,' she said. 'That can easily be answered.'

'I can think of a way by which it could be answered with terrible effect.'

She looked at me and shook her head.

'Not yet, Nigel. I'm like a dog with a bone that I want to keep between my forepaws and look at.'

'Seems to me,' said I, 'it's likely to be a bone of contention.'

'But you like contention; you said so.'

'I like a fight.'

'P'r'aps you'll get it.'

I nodded. An idea flashed into my head.

'Philida, when is that shoreland part of the town coming under the hammer?'

'Shoreland?' she repeated. 'Oh, I know. At Ponta Rica. About six weeks, I believe.'

I looked at my watch — a silly habit of mine when thinking of time or dates.

‘Six weeks. That isn’t too long. I must hustle. Let’s have that bathe, after which I shall clear out straight away.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Sheffield first, then Ponta Rica. Though I may stop in town a day or two and knock at a few doors in Whitehall.’

‘And do we meet again?’ she asked.

‘I shall do myself the honour of calling on Your Excellency at Ponta Rica.’

She smiled and replied in the same vein.

‘A white waistcoat, please, and miniature medals.’

We bathed long and luxuriously, and it was, as I told her, a very wonderful thing to be in the same sea with a girl like Philida. Afterwards we walked back to the villa and there shook hands in the most ordinary fashion and bade each other farewell. A car was standing before the house, and as we stood talking Leland Boas came down the steps. Seeing Philida, he took off his hat with the gallantry of an eighteenth-century beau.

‘Unkind,’ he said reproachfully. ‘I had promised myself the pleasure of giving you a drive.’

‘As a consolation prize you shall drive me back to lunch,’ said I. ‘We shall get into hot water with Marian if we are late.’

Boas shook his head.

‘He is thinking of those charming young ladies he has been neglecting so shamefully. Why is it, Miss Philida, the man from the wilds attracts so much affection? Well, hop in, old fellow. Au revoir, Miss Philida. We shall meet again on the island.’

‘Aren’t you tired of Ponta Rica?’ she queried.

'I have hardly begun to enjoy its charms. I must leave here this afternoon and am returning by the first boat.'

He possessed himself of her hand and bowed to kiss it. He would have achieved his object too had not Philida flicked her forefinger against the second so that the nail struck smartly against his pursed lips.

For a moment he became rigid, then straightened himself and laughed — with the intention, no doubt, of concealing from me what had happened.

'Good-bye, Nigel,' said Philida, and went into the house.

'Such a nice girl, that!' he said as he occupied the driving-seat. 'Mrs. Hunter was telling me the amusing way you came to meet each other.'

'Was that all she told you?'

He made no immediate reply, and for fifty yards we drove in silence. Then:

'No, that was not all.'

'Ah!' said I.

With his left hand he touched me on the knee.

'You're a man of good sense, I imagine, and as such should not be above taking advice.'

'Go ahead.'

'I understand you are thinking of paying a visit to Ponta Rica.'

'I am.'

'I wouldn't,' he said.

'Indeed.'

'You are hardly likely to be popular there.'

'I was not going in search of popularity, Boas.'

'Let me put it this way. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter has a great deal of influence on the island and she does not like you. And if it comes to that, I don't like you either, Praed.'

'D'you know,' I replied, 'I don't care twopence whether you do or not.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'That's a schoolboy answer.'

'Schoolboys have a way of letting you know what they mean.'

'Then let me tell you what *I* mean. Stop away or you'll regret it.'

I leaned forward and switched off the engine so that the car came to a standstill.

'Boas,' I said, 'I don't like men who make dark and stupid threats. If you've anything to say, say it with your coat off. I'll answer it in the same way.'

'Do you want a scrap?' said he.

'I think so,' I answered. 'I think you're the sort of man I'd enjoy hitting.'

He seemed to be deliberating whether or no to take up the challenge. Presently he shook his head, switched on the engine, and touched the self-starter.

'Not now,' said he. 'It would be uncivil to our hostess to turn up with black eyes at the luncheon-table. Perhaps a little later on, Praed.'

We finished the drive in silence.

9

THAT afternoon I managed to get Marshall to myself. I told him I wanted advice, and though he groaned at the prospect he eventually consented.

'You're an unfriendly brute, Nigel. I promised to take the kids prawning. Well, come on, what is it? Be as quick as you can.'

Briefly as possible I told him Ribault's scheme for a daily Anglo-American aëroplane service, with Ponta Rica as a fuel station.

'H'm! Well — what of it?'

'I wanted to sound the Government's views. You call yourself a Business Government and this is a business scheme.'

'You seem to forget our Government has been knocked out,' he retorted, 'and it's by no means certain we shall be returned at the election.'

'Assuming you are returned.'

His reply was oblique but practical.

'What's the Government to get out of it?'

'Payment for the ground and a large yearly figure for the right of using the island as a port.'

'But this scheme is in direct opposition to the existing steamship lines, in which an enormous amount of private and public capital is involved.'

'It could hardly affect 'em for some years.'

'Yes. But it's the thin edge of the wedge, and that means opposition. Opposition means lost votes.'

'It would mean the difference between solvency and insolvency so far as Ponta Rica is concerned.'

'Perhaps. But the man in the street doesn't care whether Ponta Rica pays or loses. It's too small, too remote to enter into his calculation. You must tickle imagination with a stiffer feather, Nigel, if you want Government support.'

'You mean the formation of a national Monte Carlo is more attractive.'

'Obviously. The element of chance gets everybody's money. It's magnetic.'

'Now look here, Marshall,' I said. 'You won't tell me Great Britain is going to turn down a sound commercial scheme for the sake of setting up a tinpot gambling hell. It's up against the whole spirit of the constitution.'

Marshall shook his head wearily.

'My dear boy, you don't begin to understand the

spirit of our post-war constitution. Nobody is taking anything seriously. Commercial values have faded into insignificance beside entertainment values. That's why we've put the army back into red coats. This Empire is being run by showmanship, illuminated signs, and catch-phrase politics. Sound commercial principles may, and doubtless do, exist beneath the surface, but unless you stick sequins and the pantomime tinsel onto that surface, they haven't a chance of success.'

'Meaning that if I'm to pull this through I must look for a headline?'

'Exactly.'

'Marshall,' I said, putting a paper in his hand, 'that paper sets out the naval expenditure in ship, time, and money that it cost Great Britain to police the Atlantic trade routes during the war.'

He tossed it aside.

'I know it by heart.'

'Imagine what the difference would have been if that work had been carried out by aërial craft from a Central Atlantic base.'

He looked at me and whistled.

'Suppose,' I continued, 'we construct a huge aërodrome at Ponta Rica which in the event of hostilities is immediately handed over to the Air Force?'

'Yes,' said Marshall, 'that's pretty. There is imagination in that. Armaments are not fashionable at the moment and you'd never squeeze a penny from the Exchequer for new ones. But if a private company ——' He stopped and shook his head. 'But this is all rot, Nigel. There's not a level acre on the island. It's as nobbly as a rock cake.'

'Except where the old town now stands.'

Marshall rose and slapped me on the shoulder.

'Nigel,' he said, 'you're a bright lad. Well, what do you want me to do?'

'Give me a letter to Sir Horace Phillimore, of the Air Force.'

He sat down and wrote it.

'And to the First Sea Lord, and to the Colonial Secretary.'

He wrote both.

'Now what?' said he.

'Now,' I returned, 'I wish you joy of your prawning. I'm going back to England to-night.'

He made a long face.

'Marian won't like that. I think I shall mizzle off before the news spreads.'

'If from time to time it's needed, I shall count on your support,' I warned him.

'If we come back to power, it's yours,' said he.

Surrounded by children of various sizes and ages, he marched up the road, a net across his shoulder.

I turned towards a hammock in the garden to make my excuses to Marian.

IO

MARSHALL'S letters of recommendation, although valuable in the initial stages, did not encourage the great ones of land, air, and water to linger over me and my affairs. The exception to the rule was Sir Horace Phillimore, which was natural, as he had the most to gain.

'Something for nothing appeals to any man,' he said. 'Go ahead and build your aërodrome and we'll look at it when you've done.'

'But what I want from you,' I told him, 'is a letter to the Governor urging the adoption of the scheme.'

His eyes twinkled.

‘You can have it — but mind, it will merely be an unofficial opinion.’ He chortled outright and added: ‘I doubt if it’ll be any use to you. Frankie Prothero has no affection for other branches of the Service.’

I had met that warning wherever I went.

‘It’ll be up to me to find a leverage,’ said I.

He thumped down the licked flap of an envelope and wished me luck. The interview, so far as it went, was satisfactory — as also was one I had at the Admiralty. At the Colonial Office I met with little enthusiasm.

‘Ponta Rica is more trouble than it’s worth,’ I was told. ‘The island has been fitted out with a Governor and a garrison, and so far as this country is concerned he can do what he likes with it. If it were swallowed up by the sea, no one would care a hoot.’

I was rash enough to mention Heligoland, which brought the interview to a close.

‘The two cases are not parallel. Talk to Sir Francis Prothero. We shall act on his recommendation, and I have no doubt the same will apply to any Government that may succeed us.’

Ribault, who had come down from Sheffield to save me a journey north, expressed satisfaction at the progress I had made. We dined together nightly at Simpson’s, the only restaurant he would condescend to visit, declaring that nowhere else could he get enough to eat.

‘A fine attack, m’dear,’ he said, ‘and I’ll stake my reputation you’ll bring it off.’

To guard against optimism I gave him details of my forty-eight hours’ visit to France. He looked a little glum at first, but later cheered up.

‘Not sure,’ he said, ‘that the incentive you have to make a success of it doesn’t outweigh a few enemies. What’s your friend’s name again?’

‘Leland Boas.’

A waiter who was in the act of setting down two tankards of beer upon our table looked at me questioningly.

‘I beg your pardon, sir. Is Mr. Boas a friend of yours?’

‘Eh, what’s that?’ from Ribault.

‘The gentleman was here a minute ago, sir, sitting the other side of the screen here. You was back to back, as you may say. You’ve been dining back to back the last three nights, sir.’

When the waiter had gone I looked at Ribault. He humped his huge shoulders.

‘Some men,’ he said, ‘would call that a coincidence. I wonder how much he heard.’

‘For the sake of argument we’ll assume everything.’

‘Had you any idea you were being followed?’

‘Never crossed my mind.’

‘I wonder, now,’ said he, ‘whether this accounts for a letter I received this morning.’

He pulled a crumpled sheet of business note-paper from his pocket and tossed it over the table to me.

It was marked ‘Private and Confidential’ and bore the address of the head offices, Cameliard Smith Steam Navigation Company. The letter briefly stated that having been informed that Ribault, Zealer & Palatine contemplated in the near future launching a new transport scheme, the Cameliard Smith Steam Navigation Company would be glad of an opportunity of purchasing shares to the extent of fifty-five per cent of the total issue. Failing acceptance of this proposal they urged the chairman of Ribault, Zealer & Palatine to meet the chairman of Cameliard Smith and discuss the matter before further steps were taken.

‘They want a controlling interest.’

Ribault nodded.

'It's a lesson never to sit with a curtain behind me.'

'Have you replied to this?'

'Yes — to the effect that we were running a lorry service from Land's End to John o' Groat's and should be delighted to let 'em have any shares they want — at a slight premium. I imagine there will be more correspondence of a similar kind in the course of the next week or two. Got your passage fixed for Friday?'

'I wired this morning.'

'I'll walk with you to your hotel.'

I bought a paper in the Strand to see how the horses had done. As usual I had backed the wrong 'uns, and I was about to toss it away when a headline caught my eye.

'The Peril of the Air,' it ran, and in smaller type, 'Dangers of Civil Aviation.' Followed a list of casualties sustained during passenger flights over a period of twelve months. There was also a footnote:

'We propose to publish a series of articles on this subject warning the public against the danger of aërial transport. Look out for "More Haste Less Speed" from the pen of Sir James Lasko in to-morrow's issue.'

I handed the paper to Ribault.

'Is that coincidence — or propaganda?'

He glanced at the article with squinnied eyes.

'Quite so, m'dear, quite so. Looks like we shall have some fun.'

In my pigeon-hole at the hotel was a letter from the shipping agents. They regretted they would be unable to book me a passage to Ponta Rica on the twenty-second. 'We expect to have a few vacancies on the Buckingham, which sails on the thirty-first prox.'

I read it aloud, and it was the first time I saw Ribault angry.

'Give that to me,' he said. 'I'll break those offices to-morrow morning. They can't do it — it's dead against the law.'

'Just a moment,' I said. 'Don't let's be in a hurry. It's clearly evident Boas wants to keep us out till his scheme has gone through. He relies on putting it through in the next six weeks. It's further evident that the steamship companies will give him all the support they can.'

'You're going to travel on Friday's boat if I set fire to Pall Mall and Cockspur Street to get you aboard.'

I shook my head.

'Nothing of the kind. I am going to accept their offer of a passage on the thirty-first of next month.'

'By which time we shall have missed the 'bus.'

'Not at all. I shall go north as conspicuously as possible with a pair of Purdeys and an Irish red setter. At Crewe you will send some one to meet me who'll take possession of the setter and the Purdeys and continue the journey. Meanwhile I'll come south as inconspicuously as possible, cross the Channel in a pleasure steamer, get left behind, make my way to Portugal, get aboard a tramp from Lisbon to the Azores and make Ponta Rica as best I can.'

Ribault looked at me with humorous appreciation.

'It's a round-the-corner way of doing business,' he said, 'but I dare say you're right. We may be up against larger forces than I'd bargained for. In the meantime I'll try and find out a bit more about Leland Boas.'

After that we discussed details.

Next morning I walked down to the shipping offices in Pall Mall to practise the first of the deceptions and incidentally to discover that my movements were closely shadowed. In that respect I rather admired Leland

Boas's strategy, for at the hotel there was no one suspicious. He had guessed rightly that my first destination would be Pall Mall, and there, sure enough, his man was posted. I flatter myself I gave rather a sound performance of anger and irritation at being unable to book a passage until so late a date. I even demanded to see the passenger list, which I found most elaborately in order. I was, however, struck by the fact that the majority of the bookings had been made simultaneously, which is to say they were all entered in the same hand, and those at the top of the plan had dried dark while those below were in pale characters where the wet ink had been absorbed by the blotting-paper.

After that I marched to the post-office in Saint James's Street — my faithful sleuth in attendance. Here I wrote two telegrams in the most villainous hand imaginable.

'I am very sorry,' said the girl behind the grille, 'but I can't read these.'

I affected the very exact tones of an irritable man.

'Ribault, Effingham, Sheffield. Cannot obtain passage before thirty-first proximo. Praed. Yes. A. E. D.'

'And the other?' she asked.

'Angus Conrad, Interlochrie, Aberdeenshire. Delighted accept invitation to shoot. Expect me Friday, Nigel.'

Angus would be surprised to receive that wire, as to the best of my knowledge he was unaware of my return to England. It would be necessary to take him to some extent into my confidence, for I intended that some one answering to my description should be shooting grouse on his moors after I had vanished into the blue. In the last twenty-four hours my respect for Boas had substantially increased. He was a man who did not leave much to chance. Several morning news-

papers had commented on the overnight article regarding passenger 'planes, and one or two had flown leaders on the subject. It looked like the beginning of a campaign. Leland Boas meant to be first to influence public opinion. He was a man to be taken seriously.

After leaving the post-office I walked to one of my clubs, where I sent a second wire to Angus Conrad explaining the first, and put through a trunk call to Ribault, who had returned to Sheffield overnight.

'We must be thorough,' I said, 'or I shall find myself waylaid.'

I heard his grunt of assent and the objection:

'But where are we going to find a chap who looks like you, m'dear? Your peculiarly rare beauty don't blossom on every bush.'

I had thought of that.

'You must rout out my cousin Harvey Praed, Old Farm, Inner Stoke, Chester. He's the chap for this job. Apart from the joke of the thing he'll enjoy the shooting. We're supposed to be much of a muchness to look at, and anyway he has my walk. Tell him he's to wear the clothes I send and tell him to be in the inner buffet on the centre platform at Crewe at 10.50 P.M. on Friday. Tell him, moreover, that he's to act on a signal from me, as it's unlikely I shall have a chance to speak to him.'

'You love this secret service stuff, don't you?' chuckled Ribault. 'All right, my dear.'

Outside the club Boas's bloodhound was still waiting. He had made a few minor changes in his appearance. When first I had seen him he was clean-shaven, whereas now, thanks to the adhesive properties of diachylon, he wore a neat little moustache with up-turned ends and carried his raincoat instead of wearing it. The fellow was an artist and took pride in his work.

I decided to give him a bit of colour to add to his report. Accordingly I went to Purdey's and ordered them to send round my guns, which they had in keeping, to the hotel. Then I drifted into Saint James's Park where I wasted half an hour taking sights with a walking-stick at ducks as they rose and wheeled over the lake. Still further to the character of a man about to indulge his sporting propensities, I marched off to Burberry's, in the Haymarket, where I bought a shooting-suit off the peg, a reversible tweed and rainproof coat and a tweed hat. Having placed my order, I instructed the assistant to repeat it unto the uttermost detail.

'But surely, sir, you don't want the same material twice over?'

'That's exactly what I do want — even the stockings must be alike.'

I gave him two addresses — my own at the hotel and my cousin Harvey's near Chester — and told him to be sure the latter was posted straight away.

'Incidentally,' I added, 'if any one should ask you questions, forget that the order was repeated. Understand?'

He looked mystified.

'A practical joke,' I said darkly.

I had rightly guessed that my follower would not venture inside the shop. He had disposed himself round the corner in Orange Street, satisfying his curiosity by occasional peeps at me through the plate-glass window. As I came out, under cover of lighting a cigarette, he half concealed his face with cupped hands. To obtain a closer view of him I stopped and begged the favour of a match. His hand was perfectly steady as he offered it. I noticed a white scar beneath his thumbnail and also that he had the thick, pudgy hands of a pugilist. This information might be of value if he proposed

to vary his face fittings while engaged in keeping me under observation.

Having planned the meeting for my benefit rather than for his, I kept my head down beneath the brim of my hat while accepting the light. He volunteered the information that it was grand weather, to which I assented with a nod.

The man was no fool, for he made no further attempt to follow me. He must have argued that had he done so my suspicions would be aroused. The way he wished me good-morning and marched off in the opposite direction had a certain expertness about it that appealed to my love of technique. Doubtless he counted on being able to pick me up again at will. I quite missed his gentle attentions and for the rest of the day drifted about the West End in a kind of bored inactivity.

I returned to my hotel about six-thirty to find a wire from Ribault which read: 'Everything arranged.' This was good news. It meant that Harvey had agreed. There was also a note which had been left by hand:

Dear Old Nigel, — Just heard from Palatine that you're back. Splendid news — we must forgather. I'm tied up for the early part of the evening with a duty dinner. If you're free, let's meet at the Columbine, in Gerrard Street, at twelve o'clock. It's quite a cheery joint for folks who don't want to go to bed early. Heaps to talk about, so do roll up. I'll be standing by.

Ever to a cinder

CHARLIE MEARS

I had the devil of a business to decipher the scrawl, for Charlie wrote as he lived, crazily and all over the place. I had known Charlie intimately during the war as a fellow who feared nobody and nothing — a scatter-brained, jolly fellow. It was he who piloted the

machine which dropped me on German soil some fifty miles behind the lines. Two months later he had picked me up again in the same place as casually as an omnibus conductor picks up a passenger from the kerb.

The thought of seeing him again offered a pleasant diversion, and although I knew nothing of the club to which he had invited me, I made up my mind to turn up at the appointed hour. I tucked the card of admission he had enclosed into my pocket before going down to dinner.

The evening passed dully enough. I did a show, had a couple of drinks at the club, and strolled round to keep my appointment a little after midnight.

Number 22 Gerrard Street was a dingy and unprepossessing house, although some effort to enliven its appearance had been made by the addition of floral window-boxes and coloured blinds. It struck me that the entertainment offered behind those grubby walls would hardly be of a character to appeal to any but the shoddy-minded.

The door was opened by a mincing type of manservant — a smooth and smiling Semite who looked as if he wanted kicking. He examined my card, told me to come in and asked me to sign my name in a visitors' register. Chiefly because I disliked the fellow I refused, although in any case I doubt if I should have done so, having no great ambition to feature in the archives of such a miserable establishment. He told me it was a strict rule that visitors should write their names in the book, but, like other rules of the club, it might be broken at the whim of the visitor.

'Every one pleethe himthelf here,' he added.

This I thought was unlikely and asked if Captain Mears had arrived.

I don't think the fellow knew one member from

another, for he shook his head, smiled and nodded, and replied:

‘Sure to be here thomewhere. Walk straight through the curtainth.’

This I did and found myself in a room about the size of a small gymnasium. It was full of tables and the thick atmosphere reeked of cigarette smoke and cheap perfumes; although after hours, there was plenty of drink about, evidence of its potency being revealed in the shrill, senseless laughter and the loose, lolling attitudes of many who had partaken too freely thereof.

It did not need a half-glance to size up the quality of the company. This was no haunt of the exuberant young man about town in search of thrill and gaiety, but appealed to an altogether lower stratum of life. It was a mucky affair, and the faces of the habitués were debauched and vicious and mercenary; the men, for the most part of Dago breed, being to my mind worse than the women, upon whom, I hazarded, they depended for livelihood. Among them was a sprinkling of negroes with shiny silk hats and paste studs and a mouthy way of talking. I have always hated hearing fluent English spoken by black men, and the sight of them in close proximity to white women loosens my temper quicker than most things.

I thought Charlie Mears must have altered pretty considerably with the passing of time if this were the kind of dive in which he entertained his friends. I promised myself the pleasure of telling him so when he turned up — for, as far as I could see, he had not yet arrived.

I was standing in the doorway, looking about me, when a woman glided to my side.

‘Hullo, boy,’ she said. ‘Looking for some one?’

‘Yes — a friend.’

She came a little closer.

‘Oh, come! We’re all friends here, you know.’

I did not want to be rude, although I imagine that she would not have noticed it. Her features wore the unmistakable look of one who had lost the ability to be offended by anything.

‘I am sure you are,’ I answered, ‘but I’m a stranger here.’

‘It’s your fault if you stay so,’ she retorted. ‘I’m dying for a drink. Won’t you buy me one?’

I sat down at a vacant table and told her to order what she liked.

‘I knew you were a sport,’ she said. ‘I guessed it d’rectly I saw you. Will it run to cham?’

She got hold of a waiter and ordered a bottle quickly, afraid, perhaps, that I should change my mind. While waiting its arrival she beguiled me with small talk, cheap praises, little bits of vanity, and astonishing asides on the difficulty of the life she led.

This was well enough in its way, and I have no doubt had I been engaged in writing a book she would have provided valuable copy. This, however, was not my intention. I had come to meet a pal, and failing his presence would have been better pleased to get back to bed. Indeed, I had already made up my mind to go and leave the unpunctual Charlie to extract what pleasure he could from the willing devotees of the Columbine, when an imperative knocking at the street door brought every one to his feet.

It did not call for much imagination to divine the authorship of that knock. It was as unmistakably official as the creak of a policeman’s boots. Had I needed further assurance it was supplied by the expression on the faces and the sudden activity of the

company. The woman at my table had sprung to her feet and stood with twitching features.

‘Rozzers!’ cried a voice. ‘Back door, boys!’

A party of five who had been engaged in a card game of sorts rolled up the cloth with cards, counters, and cigarette ends and bundled it out of sight into a big Benares bowl. This done, they vanished through a baize curtain at the far end of the room. Others were following suit with a professional aptitude for flight one could hardly fail to admire. Some of the less experienced were shilly-shallying this way and that with no set purpose. A girl started to whimper — a man cursed her — waiters were flinging bottles full and empty through a service hatch into a void beyond. There was crashing confusion and silly, snarling oaths. The hammering at the street door had ceased, and instead came the sound of straining woodwork and the dull thud of men’s shoulders rammed against panels. The woman for whom I had bought a drink had already gone with a word flung over her shoulder advising me to do likewise.

Every instinct rebelled against joining that vulgar rabble in a scuttle for safety over dustbins and back walls, but, on the other hand, I had no desire to figure in the police court on a charge of frequenting illegal night clubs. The newspapers dearly love writing up such matter, and, although I was obscure enough, I was confident that in relation to the rest my name would come in for unwelcome notoriety. Pocketing my pride, I lit out for the back exit as hard as I could go. Nor was I too soon, for as the curtains closed behind me and I plunged into the obscurity of a narrow passage, I heard the front door come down with a crash.

The passage ended in a flight of wooden stairs, down which I ran three at a time. There was a stone floor in

the basement with a glass-panelled door at the farther end. This was standing ajar, but as I raced towards it it was slammed by somebody from inside. For a second I saw a silhouette of a man's head and shoulders. Then a voice said:

‘No, you don’t!’

It must have been an extra sense made me duck; as I did so I heard something whiz through the air above my head. Then I struck out. It was stone dark, but I judged that my hidden assailant could not be far off, and I had the satisfaction of feeling my right fist sink spongily into a man's paunch. He collapsed against me like a burst balloon, bringing me to the ground beneath his weight. A fat hand groped upwards towards my throat; and next instant the lights were up, the police were upon us, and I was dragged to my feet.

‘Fighting, was you?’ said a mountainous constable. ‘It’ll all go down on the charge sheet, my lad. Here, Harry’ — this to a second constable — ‘lay ’old of the other one and warn him.’

My late assailant's face was hidden from me, but as he struggled to his feet he put a hand against the wall to steady himself. Beneath his thumbnail was a white scar. So that was that — and this was this — and it looked as if Mr. Leland Boas had scored some pretty heavy points in the game. It was not enough that I should be denied a passage to Ponta Rica. My reputation was to be attacked into the bargain.

The sudden thought of spicy newspaper cuttings which I had no doubt Boas would faithfully deliver to Philida sent the blood to my head and made me behave like a lunatic. The constable in charge of me felt too secure in his enormous bulk to expect opposition from a light-weight.

From time immemorial the police force have stuck

to a belief that a man with collar and sleeve gripped is a man caught. It was a Japanese who disproved that theory. I know a bit of jiu-jitsu and had used it with advantage on previous occasions. Ducking my head, I made a complete circle inwards towards my captor, imposing a strain on his finger joints which Nature has supplied no muscular power to resist.

'Yaou!' he cried, and I was through the back door and had slammed and bolted it before he knew what had happened. I think I knew there would be a bolt on the *outside* of that back door. People who use back doors for purposes of flight also use them for the purpose of obstructing pursuit.

The yard in which I found myself was littered with straw and bottles. At the far end was a low wall with fresh scratches on the brickwork indicating where it had been used as the path of retreat by those who had gone before me. The wall ran west toward Wardour Street and east to the Shaftesbury Theatre. The former was the shorter distance, and from the fact that there was a division between two houses about thirty yards away, I had little doubt that this was the exit by which the habitués of the Columbine had made their escape. I was about to follow suit when a sure conviction came over me that this was the exact point at which the police would have set a trap. It remained to discover an alternative. Facing me was the back of a block of flats. The lighted windows of a staircase well faintly illuminated the yard in which I stood. The second-floor window was open, and braced to the wall beside it was an iron fire-ladder, its last section drawn up about twenty feet clear of the ground. If one could reach the lower rung of that ladder, escape was simple. But how to reach it was another matter. I scrambled up onto the wall and along a short one that traversed

it and brought me to the side of the flats themselves. I was now nearer the ladder by some seven feet, but seven feet plus my own height from a standing jump did not encourage much hope of success. Already there were batterings at the door I had bolted and heads were appearing at windows. Time was short. In the yard belonging to the flats was a great galvanized-iron dustbin full to the brim with unspeakable rubbish. It was not a very agreeable task for a man in a dress suit to seize the thing, empty out its filthy contents and stand it the wrong way up on a seven-foot wall. But this was not the moment for particularity. I'll guarantee I made a quicker job of it than a professional dustman would have done. The bin rocked perilously as I scrambled to the top of it, crouched and sprang. My fingers closed on the lowest rung of the ladder with barely a joint to spare. After that the business was simple. I nipped up that ladder like a monkey and rolled in at the open window. Peeping over the sill, I saw the police pouring through the doorway into the yard of the house in Gerrard Street; what is more, I caught a glimpse of helmets in the narrow alleyway which I had so nearly chosen as my line of flight. As good luck would have it, the night porter was not on duty in the hall of the flats. The office was deserted, and I seized the opportunity of borrowing a clothes brush before turning the latch and letting myself out into Shaftesbury Avenue.

I was free, and consciousness of the fact filled me with elation. The nimble plot to plaster my name with a sticky kind of dirt had failed. I knew now the precise nature of my adversary. One of these days we should see what we could do about it. It may have been curiosity or sheer cockiness encouraged me to turn down Wardour Street and mix with the crowd

which had assembled to watch the police go by with the odds and ends of humanity collected in the raid. The chances of being recognized were negligible, for I had kept my head averted when the constable arrested me. A large motor-car was standing at the kerb adjoining Maxims, its interior lit by an electric bulb. There was only one occupant — a man who was leaning forward watching the procession with interest. It was Leland Boas, anxious, no doubt, to assure himself of the success of his operation. At first sight of him a surge of anger went to my head, but a second later I was rocked by the humour of it all. It was essentially comic that he should be sitting there waiting to see me dragged along by a copper. I pushed through the crowd and drummed my knuckles against the window glass.

He turned sharply, and his face when he saw me was a study in the suppression of disappointment.

‘Hallo, Boas,’ said I. ‘Thought you were in Ponta Rica. What’s all the fuss about?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know,’ he answered slowly.

‘But you look worried, Boas. I hope the police have not been interfering with any of your friends.’

He ignored me, and, leaning forward, gave an order to his chauffeur.

‘Well, well,’ said I, ‘I dare say I’ll see all about it in to-morrow’s papers.’

The big car moved silently away. The entertainment, so far as it concerned Leland Boas, provided no further interest.

I dropped into the club for a drink before going to bed. There was a man there who knew Charlie Mears intimately. To my inquiry:

‘Is he in town?’

He replied:

‘No — Abyssinia.’

‘Aha!’ said I. ‘I just wondered.’

II

IN the morning papers next day the attack on civil aviation had grown to important proportions. A lot of rubbish was being written. It was clear, however, that the traducers of passenger 'planes were not to have it all their own way. A counterblast was launched by the British United Trans-Continental Airways, Limited, in which I recognized the energies of old James Ribault. I had expected something of the kind, for no one threw the gage to James Ribault without him blundering into the fray to pick it up and pitch it back again. The man was a born fighter, and he fought with every ounce of his weight — which was considerable. Fresh proof of the thoroughness of Leland Boas was contained in a paragraph dealing with Government waste. Among the various charges cited was the case of the island of Ponta Rica. A formidable list of figures was published showing the heavy burden the maintenance of the island placed on the shoulders of the British taxpayer.

'The economic conditions of this country,' it stated, 'are such as to render it criminal for wastage of this kind to pursue its course unchecked. Ponta Rica, as it stands, is about as much use to Great Britain as the sunk German battle fleet in the Scapa Flow. The time is ripe for a practical scheme to be put forward to place Ponta Rica on a commercial basis.'

At lunch time I bought the afternoon papers and read the report of the police court proceedings which followed last night's raid. According to the sergeant who gave evidence, the Columbine was the resort of some of the most disreputable characters in the West End. The paper published a complete list of the names of persons who had been arrested. If anything could

have successfully quashed my mission, featuring in that list would have done it. I resolved to watch my step pretty thoroughly until I had given the slip to Boas and his confederates.

The man I had hit at the night club was not on duty that day. His place was taken by an unobtrusive little fellow with soft and pleading eyes, who pattered round after me like a faithful dog. He must have found the job dull and wearisome. I gave him little opportunity for studying my features, but ample opportunity to study my walk. I must have walked ten miles between 2.30 P.M. and 6 o'clock. I walked partly for exercise and partly to be annoying. In this I succeeded, for he presented an exhausted appearance when I turned into the club for a game of bridge. Through the window I saw him clinging to the railings for support.

It was this that gave me an idea which next day — the one on which I was to go north — I put into operation. I determined to bring him to such a state of bodily fatigue that when the change between Harvey and myself was made at Crewe, he would be too tired and stupid to use his faculties.

I went to bed early and rose at seven-thirty, put on flannel bags and a sweater and walked round Hyde Park. That made a nice beginning. After breakfast I changed into more respectable clothing and started off again. This time I walked to Barnes, where I collected the red Labrador gun dog from a friend who lived there. The dog was called Rover — a name that suited him. Together we roamed tremendously all over Barnes Common and up Sheen Lane to Richmond Park. In Richmond Park we played races and covered much ground. We emerged at Robin Hood Gate, where I bought some victuals from a stall on wheels. These I put in my pocket and munched them as I

walked along. I took the road which leads over Wimbledon Common and citywards through the slums of Clapham and Battersea. We arrived at the hotel about four. By this time I was a bit tired myself and beginning to have qualms of sympathy for the poor unfortunate who had been dragging along in my wake. He had stuck to his job like a good 'un, but he was almost a dead man. He must have been half-crazy for want of food, drink, and somewhere to sit down; but it was no part of my scheme to provide him with luxuries or repose. I meant him to eat in the train and fall asleep from sheer exhaustion. But the train did not leave until seven-thirty and it was up to me to keep him occupied until I was ready to go. At first I feared I should be driven to take another little stroll, but a charmingly simple and effective alternative suggested itself. I caused the porter to put my baggage and guns on the hotel steps with the dog Rover in charge. This could hardly fail to suggest that I was on the point of departure. The arrangement was perfectly agreeable to Rover, who would gladly have sat till eternity beside a gun-case. It was agreeable to me too, since it gave me leisure for a Turkish bath, a couple of drinks, and half an hour's stretch in a long chair. My taxi to Euston was closely followed by a second, and in the queue at the booking-office the wreckage of my small pursuer was close behind me.

It was too late to book a sleeper, but thanks to a tip to the guard, Rover and I were given a compartment to ourselves. I took a voucher for the second service of dinner, and on my way along the corridors to the refreshment car I had the satisfaction of seeing my friend fast asleep with his head against the window-pane.

We arrived at Crewe at 11 P.M., and I was halfway

down the platform before the door of his compartment flew open and he hopped out. I saw him throw a hasty glance through my carriage windows, then look up and down the platform. He spotted me as I turned into the buffet. I had fifty yards' start, but there was not much time. Hurrying past the long bar I darted through the swing doors of the coffee-room. At first I thought Harvey had failed me until I saw him with his back to the wall that adjoined the door. He sprang to his feet as I came in. His clothes were identical with my own.

I said:

'The carriage with a red dog in it — second coach.'

'Right,' he replied and was gone.

He was leaning against the bar ordering a cup of coffee when the little man staggered in. This I saw through the gauze blind of the glass door panel. He looked tremendously relieved to see Harvey. I changed my reversible coat from the rainproof side outermost to the tweed. Also I took off the hat I was wearing and put on a cap.

Three minutes later the train, with Harvey and the little man aboard, steamed slowly out of the station.

I wonder to this day what the dog Rover thought about it.

12

THERE was, at this time of year, a fairly regular service of tramp steamers engaged in the fruit trade between Portugal and the Azores, upon one of which I hoped to obtain a passage. But since they varied their ports of call in accordance with cargoes likely to be collected, there was no guarantee I should be able to reach Ponta Rica by a specified date. By the normal passenger route it would have taken me three days, but by the

route I proposed to follow it might well take the best part of three weeks.

I crossed the Channel unobtrusively enough on an excursion steamer arriving at Boulogne in the early afternoon. On landing I walked to the Hotel Bristol, rich in war memories, whither some three days before my luggage had been forwarded. The Paris express, which had no connexion with pleasure boats, had left the station a few minutes before I landed. The next was not due to start until seven o'clock. I had four hours to wait, and Philida was but a few miles away. It was out of the question to go over to Hardelet and hail her forth and expose myself to the risk of encountering Mrs. Hunter; on the other hand, it was equally out of the question to be so near and yet have no word with her. Something would have to be done. I bethought me of Marian and the telephone. Kindly Providence decreed that Marian was at home. Her voice answered my ring — a voice that trembled with instant excitement on recognizing mine.

'I'm incognito,' I warned her. 'Hiding at the Bristol Hotel.'

'What do you want?'

'Where's your imagination?'

'Philida?'

'Terribly,' I replied.

'Divine person,' she purred, 'and I've been accusing you as the rottenest lover a girl ever had. All right — stand by. I'll fix it.'

'Can you get hold of her?'

'Idiot! I've never let her go since you so shamelessly vanished. We adore each other. I've even endured that appalling Nuñez-Hunter woman on your account. You see, I'm the only person Philida can talk to about you.'

‘And does she?’ I asked.

‘Don’t be a fool,’ said Marian, and rang off.

It seemed ages that I stood with my nose flattened against a window-pane. At long last the Sunbeam car came bouncing over the *pavé*. Marian was driving, and beside her sat Philida. She must have known I should have been on the watch, for her eyes flashed a kind of general greeting at the hotel façade. They came to rest on the window at which I stood, with a smile that I could no more describe than forget.

I bolted for the stairs and we almost crashed into one another in the empty hall below. Marian was flushing like a sunset, for there was nothing in the world she enjoyed so much as manœuvring people’s love affairs.

‘Go on — kiss her,’ she cried. ‘She’ll be furious if you don’t.’

But I kissed Marian’s hand instead.

‘Marian, you’re a darling,’ I said, ‘and you can tell Marshall I told you so.’

She turned hopelessly to Philida.

‘This man’s no use; he’s afraid of you. Well, well! When am I to come back?’

I said:

‘My train doesn’t go for two hours — but you can’t possibly ——’

‘Rubbish, of course I can. You don’t imagine I’m here to make a threesome, do you?’

‘Yes, but ——’

‘When Marshall was courting me he used to take any intruders, male or female, by the ear and throw ’em out. Mother used to say he was the most painful fiancé I ever had. Buck up, you two, I’ll be back in an hour and three quarters.’

With that she melted like a rainbow. I led the way

to a public reading-room on the first floor. Its only occupant was a small, bearded Frenchman with a round belly and a copy of the 'Echo de Paris.' With the natural gallantry of his race he sprang to his feet, bowed, and hurried out. As the door closed, I took Philida's hand in mine.

'We're getting a lot of help,' she said, 'from strangers as well as friends.'

I raised her hand and kissed it over and over again.

'That's nice,' she said. 'I like you to do that. I've got awfully fond of you since you've been away.'

'You marvel! Do you mean that?'

She nodded.

'Of course, or I shouldn't have said it.'

'And I — I'm simply eaten up with love of you. Wherever I've been these last few days you've been dancing along ahead of me. Yesterday I walked thirty miles with you as my pilot.'

I drew her down on a wretched little sofa which one day I shall buy and preserve in spirits of wine. Her marvellous black hair with the red glint was brushing my cheek electrically. I put my arms round her and turned her face towards me.

'Marian was right,' she said. 'I want to be kissed — I want to give you something I've given no one else — ever.'

She was so light — it was like holding nothing and everything in one's arms.

After a while she pushed me gently away, pressed her fingers tightly over her eyes, gave a sort of shuddering sigh, rose, stood by the window, came back, and, putting a hand over mine, sat beside me again.

'I think I can be sensible now, Nigel — before, I could only be sensitive. When you left I was awfully proud of the way you left — just shaking hands and

going like that. It seemed to me so good and civilized. Then, when I thought about it, something in me said No — and I began to resent. I've been resenting ever since. Not you, but myself. I haven't been fair to my emotions. I'd cheated them. That wasn't brave. No, don't interrupt, feelings must be righter than habits. I felt like some one who'd made herself hungry on olives and then never even got a sandwich.'

The gravity of her tone made me laugh.

'I won't be patronized, Nigel — I'm liking you well enough to tell you all that goes on inside my head. When a woman's in love she analyses what she's got. A man only tots up what he means to take. A jolly lot of thinking you've let me in for, Nigel.'

'Happy thinking?'

'The best I've ever had.' She was utterly, fearlessly frank. 'For no reason that I can see I've thought you into a hero. It's a frightful responsibility for you, but I can't help it.'

'Philida,' I said, 'I worship you.'

'No,' she said, shaking her head. 'I'm not going to be kissed for the praises I give.'

'Then for what?'

'Only for absolute musts.'

'This is an absolute must.'

'Is it? Well, perhaps.'

After that she tucked her head defensively into my shoulder.

'Now,' she said, 'I've told you all I've thought — or enough to go on with — and you must tell me everything you've done, which is a proper and usual division of labour between men and women.'

So I told her all that had happened since I left Hardelet. When I came to my escape from the police over the dustbins of Gerrard Street she sat up and listened with dancing eyes.

'And you actually saw the brute afterwards?'

'He was sitting in his car in the pious hope of seeing me dragged off to the station.'

'Oh, what a splendid, splendid sell! What would have happened if you'd missed that ladder when you jumped?'

'I should have abandoned myself to the laws of gravity.'

'Did you hit that man in the passage very hard?'

'Not so hard as I hope one of these days to hit Boas.'

Her fingers closed round the muscles of my upper arm.

'I'm a frightful kid at heart,' she confessed; 'although I behave grown-up, I *am* a kid. I love the idea of people being strong and bashing each other about. It's an awful confession, but I do.'

'The soldier's daughter,' I laughed. 'The Pride of the Regiment.'

'Um! all that sort of thing. I'd love to be fought for. A real Titanic struggle for my sake. Mortal combat.'

'Tell me where the dragon lives.'

'I say, what awful rot we're talking; if it wasn't for what's at the back of it, it would be rot too. Do all people like us talk this way?'

'There are no others quite like us,' I replied inanely.

'It'd be nice to believe that. Nigel, are you satisfied we are going to be enough for each other? I've my own idea. I'm asking you.'

'I was never more absolutely certain of anything.'

She looked at me for a long while without speaking. Then:

'But have you given yourself a chance to know? There are all those girls of Marian's, for instance, and heaps of others much easier — much less tiresome than I am. I shouldn't mind a bit if you cared for them a

little — made a fuss of them — even made love to them, if it 'ud help you to be absolutely sure. I'm not jealous that way — not a bit jealous of experiment, but I think — I know I'd be terribly, terribly jealous of certainty. Once you had declared, I should want you to be so positively — so inflexibly sure.'

'Positively and inflexibly, I am sure.'

'That's a tremendous thing to say.'

Something else troubled her.

'I shouldn't like you to be in love with me out of an obstinate determination — just because you'd told yourself you were. Oh, Nigel, what a ghastly thing a dutiful affection would be! Going on and on and wearing a little thinner every day, but sticking to its guns. That's a morbid thought if you like.'

'Philida,' I said, 'I can't make head or tail of half you are saying. You scare me rather, because I don't seem to have found a way to convince you that what I feel is only a beginning of feelings which — oh, you know what I mean!'

She rubbed a cheek against my shoulder and nodded comfortably.

'I know what you mean — and you mustn't be scared — and you mustn't mind if I'm making the most of it all. This is my first being in love, and you want it to be my last. It's all rather astonishing and head-spinning — I'm out of breath from it. But because of that I don't want to miss a single part of it. I want to keep every little bit packed and stored in my heart for remembering.'

'Please God I shall make them happy memories, my dear.'

She gave a free breath and stretched out her arms so that I felt her lithe body beside me as taut as a violin string.

'They'll be good if they aren't all happy,' she said. 'There's a sea of trouble ahead, and we're for it, Nigel. I've instincts, and they tell me so.' One of her arms crooked about my neck and drew my head down to hers. 'But I don't mind troubles, and you don't, Nigel. So what's it matter?'

A church clock struck the quarter. Philida sprang to her feet and tugged the creases out of her frock.

'That's over,' she said. 'Marian'll be waiting, and you've the Paris train to catch. Goodest of good luck, old man.'

I took her hands and held them.

'Happy?' I queried.

'Wildly,' she nodded.

From the street below came an insistent hooting from a Klaxon horn.

PART II

PART II

I

I SHALL not readily forget my first sight of Ponta Rica when, after three weeks in Spanish and Portuguese trains and a variety of evil-smelling fruit and wine boats, I eventually arrived. Nothing could have exceeded the wretchedness and disappointments of that journey. For days we hung about in the main archipelago while officers and crew abandoned themselves to the delights of the shore. I began to despair of reaching my destination in time to be of any use. But for a stroke of luck and a liberal bribe to the skipper of a little sailing vessel of Horta harbour in the Island of Fayal, I might well have been stuck for months. Ponta Rica, since the British occupation, was out of the track of the Dago trader, and it needed a most generous inducement to persuade the skipper of the Terceira to hoist sail and carry me across the hundred miles of intervening ocean. If Boas himself had organized the trip it could hardly have been more prolonged.

The high volcanic peaks pierced the opal mists which rose from the Atlantic. Seen in early dawn, Ponta Rica looked like a jewel shining through gossamer. As we came nearer, the mists melted away, and the white buildings of the town peeped at us, flashing from their windows golden reflections of the rising sun. A delicious feel in the air harmonized with the natural beauty of the scene. Beneath great barren cliffs skimmed a fleet of fishing boats with lateen sails. Above the cliffs were green terraces of cultivated land

rising like steps towards a slant of purple-grey scoria, drifts of pumice and dog-toothed peaks the colour of ash.

We sailed in under shortened sail, and I was put ashore in a dinghy.

The authorities, although no doubt surprised at the landing of a single passenger, stamped my papers and gave me a shore pass to hand in at the dock gates. I set off, accompanied by a mulatto boy, who hung my various belongings about his person like toys on a Christmas tree. At the gates was a Dago in the uniform of an English policeman. Indeed, he might have passed for one except that he smoked a cigar on duty and wore brown canvas shoes instead of official boots. He took my pass without looking at it, pulled out his whistle and blew a shrill blast. A one-horse fly with a striped awning came rattling towards me over the cobbles. It was clear that the police were in partnership with the transport companies, a state of affairs not uncommon in even more enlightened countries.

The driver of the fly was a genial and bacchanalian-looking person who took possession of me and my belongings, had a row with the mulatto boy in three languages, and announced to which hotel he proposed to take me, all in a single breath.

‘The señor go to the Espada, very good — very nice. Afterwards I drive him to the Atlantic Point. Then make some game at the tables. Oh, yes, I arrange all this. Very nice for the señor to find me. Oh, good man I am, you shall see.’

He spat profusely to emphasize what a capital fellow he was, and straightened the copper wire tip of his whip lash.

‘Drive me first to the old town,’ I said, ‘and then to the Hotel São Jorge.’

'Old town very empty — people all go — São Jorge not good, we go to the Espada.'

'Take off that luggage,' I said.

He looked at me closely to measure my determination, shrugged his shoulders, and mounted to the box.

'Very good, we go old town.'

With that he lashed the horse, and we shot forward like a stone from a catapult.

The old town, as I was aware from studying the maps, occupied the only flat part of the island, sprawling in great confusion over a square half-mile on the sea level. A more vile place would be hard to imagine. The smell, if possible, was worse than that of a Neapolitan slum. The streets, which were littered with garbage and indescribable filth, were as intricate as a maze. Not one in a dozen was wide enough for the passage of a vehicle. The houses lolled against one another like drunken men. More forlorn houses I have never seen: broken windows, swinging shutters, rifted plaster, and everywhere a tale of dirt, squalor, and desolation. For the most part they were deserted, although some must still have been tenanted to judge from the army of urchins who pattered along after my cab crying out for ha'pence. Square-headed youngsters, these, with pale blue eyes. They provided an unpleasant reminder of the efficiency of German occupation. A few drinking saloons still had open doors, through which I had glimpses of men leaning against walls, sitting on barrels, or sprawling on floors, engaged in some kind of draughts game. Some streets were more populous than others. Here were congregated men of several nationalities from both sides of the Mediterranean — Arabs in white burnouses, Moors in black jibbehs, Italians, Greeks, negroes, and a profusion of Spaniards picturesquely idle. Among them moved small patrols of

British soldiers, very full of spit and polish. I passed a street in which the only inhabitants were women, who leaned from balconies and dropped geraniums and orange blossoms on the awning of my cab. In an open square were the ruins of an amphitheatre, where, in the old days, corridas had been held. A section of Heavy Artillery was engaged at gun drill in the bull ring. Behind the amphitheatre, on a slight rise in the ground, was a palace built in the Moorish style — beautiful, but sadly out of repair. It boasted a high-walled garden, above which rioted a tangle of orange trees and clambering roses. This palace was situated in about the middle of the old town. It was the only dwelling which would not have been the better for pulling down. Near by was the casino, also much dilapidated. Here, however, some effort had been made to camouflage the ravages of time. Bright-coloured awnings and posters representing couples dancing with more abandon than propriety, were plastered over the broken walls. The streets approaching the casino were, by comparison, moderately clean. They were, of course, littered with thrown-away handbills, rotten oranges and dead flowers, but garbage, gizzards, heads of dead birds, sewages, and swill were absent.

I spent an hour driving in and out of the intricacies of the old town, and at the end of that time had estimated that with some tons of dynamite, an army of workmen, and a fleet of steam-rollers the ground could be levelled within six months. The job, from a mechanical point of view, was as simple as A B C. It was merely a matter of labour. As a landing-place for planes it could hardly be improved upon. They could approach from the sea without interference. Sheds and hangars could be constructed against the sheer face of the cliff, where they would be protected against wind

and storm. The formation of the cliff was an advantage which could not be overlooked. It formed a protective half-circle round the old town, guarding it against weather from three quarters of the compass. Turning my binoculars on that great natural wall which rose a thousand feet from the ground, I saw that it was honeycombed with holes and galleries, and bisected this way and that with iron footways riveted to the naked rock. These, of course, were the old German defences. One could imagine more agreeable duties than the lot of the gunner perched in those little eyries while naval fifteen-inch armour-piercing shells were crashing over the surface.

Ponta Rica had held out valiantly against the addresses of some of the lesser units of our fleet. In consequence she was left alone for several months until a super-dreadnought could be spared to attend to the business. They say the argument was brief but heated. Tacticians declare that it finally exploded the reputation of lonely sea fortresses. The cost of keeping an enemy out of range of knocking them to pieces is too great for any value that may offset it. Ponta Rica as a base for aërial ocean bombers would be able to take care of itself, but as a kind of glorified battery position it wasn't worth a bundle of army forms.

I was aroused from these reflections by a voice speaking the purest Cockney in tones of rapturous delight.

'It's you right enough. My Gawd, sir, 'oo the 'ell 'ud believe it, but it's you, major.'

I looked round and saw a man almost as out of repair as the neighbourhood.

'Kenedy!' I exclaimed.

Kenedy had been my batman in '14 when I held a commission in the R.E.'s. I would never ask for a better. A man upon whom neither danger, discomfort,

nor disaster produced the slightest effect. In the old days he had been one of the best-turned-out men in the company, but now his clothes were tattered and threadbare, and the boots he wore were a tragedy. We shook hands heartily, and I asked him what he had been doing since last we met.

'What 'aven't I, major! Oh, dear, you may ask. Everythink and then a bit. Juno, I even tried m'and at marryin'. Straight, I did. Mind you, I don't say a word against the girl, but from the minute I took 'er out of the register's I 'ad my suspicions. The way she 'andled me, sir, argued that she'd been there before. She seemed to fasten on and have all my weakness exposed. Expert like. Oh, dear. I'm not going to tell you I was surprised when 'er real 'usband showed up. Missin', 'e'd been. You should 'ave 'eard what 'e called me. Gawd, it was picturesque. Funny thing was 'e wanted 'er back! Poor beggar, 'e must 'ave 'ad a wipe over the 'ead and forgotten what it was like. 'Course I 'ad meself to consider, but I was sorry for 'im. After that I got a job with the unemployed. Oh, dear. The marchin' we did — like being back in the P.B.I. Sometimes I'd get a day's gardenin'. Gardenin', pickin' up weeds and such. Juno, major, I don't reckon it was ever intended a man should carry 'is behindside above the level of 'is 'ead. Took me abroad, gardenin' did, lookin' for somethin' I could straighten my back at. I've done some funny things — but if you was to ast me 'ow I came to fetch up at this island — and what an island! — I couldn't tell you. Got pushed off, I reckon. Marooned like. But what's brought you 'ere, sir?'

'A job, Kenedy.'

'Then you're luckier than I am.'

I looked at him. There was not a vestige of pleading

in his eyes, but it was clear enough he was down on the very roots of his luck.

'How'd you like to come and look after me?' I asked. 'I'll probably be here some while, and I could do with a man.'

'You mean that, sir?'

I nodded.

'Yes, but look at me.'

I felt in my pocket for a note-case, but with a gesture he stopped me.

'If you give me any money, major, I'll eat it,' he warned me.

I handed him a tenner.

'Eat as much of that as you can and get some clothes with the rest. Roll up to the Saint George this afternoon.'

Frederick Kenedy took the note, kissed it solemnly, tucked it away in his shirt, and executed a piece of unexpected shadow boxing, which done he turned to me with the remark:

'Any one what says a word against you, sir, can 'ave any of them on the point and won't 'ave to ask twice for a second 'elping. I'm goin' to shake 'ands with you, major, and after that I'm goin' into your service, as it was in the old days, and, thank 'Eaven, is now.'

He saluted gravely, burst into a shout of laughter, and darted off up a side turning. I had found a friend in Ponta Rica.

'Hotel São Jorge,' I called to the driver. The rickety vehicle lurched and rattled over the uneven cobbles towards the residential part of the town, which, tier upon tier, dotted the steep mountain slopes like plates upon a dresser.

I ARRIVED at the hotel a little after midday, and after hiring a suite composed of two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a sitting-room, I went down for lunch. The waiter who attended to my needs told me that the hotel was exceptionally empty, but on the arrival of the next mail boat, which was due in three days' time, there would be company. Already, he said, people were discovering the healthful virtues of Ponta Rica, although, he added, it was nothing to what would be the case in another three years' time.

'How's that?' I asked.

'It must be so, monsieur, when the old town is demolished and a new one arises in its place. Hélas, then for the Riviera!'

I affected ignorance, saying I knew nothing of these plans, being a stranger to Ponta Rica and its intentions of future development.

'But, monsieur, it is generally known. We speak of nothing else but the prosperity that shall be ours.'

'Is this a Government scheme?' I asked.

'But surely it will receive the willing consent of the Government. How could it be otherwise, since before the old palazzo there will be a great square where the soldiers of the garrison will parade and have their drills?'

The martial spirit of Sir Francis Prothero was to receive a sop from the syndicate.

'Where, then,' I asked, 'is the money coming from?'

The waiter shrugged his shoulders.

'The arrangements are in the hands of Monsieur Leland Boas, *un homme très bien connu en Angleterre*.'

'I have heard of him,' I said, 'but is there no difficulty in doing away with this old town? No legal difficulty?'

'But non, monsieur. Practically every one has left, either for the mountains or other islands. When Germans are here they sweep out every one. Some others come back, but they have no rights. Except for the palazzo there is nothing that belongs to any man.'

'To whom does the palazzo belong?'

'A Spanish monsieur. To-morrow it will be sold.'

I pricked up my ears.

'To this syndicate?'

He shook his head.

'By what you call auction, m'sieur.'

'But I suppose they'll buy it?'

The waiter looked infinitely wise.

'It is possible, monsieur, but there are rumours.'

'Oh! rumours,' said I.

My lack of interest stimulated his confidence. He dropped his voice.

'It is said that some one very big here may buy the palazzo as a present for a friend.'

And with a sly wag of the head he carried off my empty plate.

I have always had a theory that what a waiter does not know you can find out from a barber. This particular waiter seemed to know a great deal. If what he had said was true, it had an important bearing on my affairs. If the old palace was the only place whose title deeds were worthy of respect, it would be to the disadvantage of my firm for a private owner to obtain them. It was clearly evident one could not construct a flying-ground with a private dwelling slap in the middle of it.

I had intended to seek an interview with the Governor that afternoon, but in the light of what I had heard, it seemed advisable to employ the immediate present in ferreting out as much information as possible

about the proposed sale. When he came back with the wine, I asked the waiter in whose hands the sale of the property had been placed. He gave the address of a firm of auctioneers and surveyors in King George's Way. Determined to call upon them forthwith, I hurried through my lunch and went upstairs to change into something cooler.

Kenedy had already arrived and was unpacking my belongings. The man was transformed, and I marvelled how he could have fitted himself out (and in), had his hair cut and his chin shaved in the time at his disposal. He greeted me with a beatific smile, but offered no remark.

'Had some grub?' I asked.

'I 'ave, sir. It 'ud be a falsehood to deny that I wanted it.'

I sat on the bed and kicked off my shoes.

'How long have you been at Ponta Rica, Kenedy?'

'Five months, sir. It's the only place a man can live without paying rent, and there's always pidjeons to be 'ad by a man who can use a catapult.'

'Then you know something of the island.'

'Oh, dear!' was the expressive rejoinder.

'When we met this morning, did you notice that old Moorish palace close by?'

'I've slept there many a time — and fed off its oranges free gratis, and Gawd preserve me from bein' a vegetarian.'

'I hear it's for sale.'

'That's right.'

'Any idea who's going to buy it?'

Kenedy looked at me shrewdly.

'I know 'oo they *say* is going to buy it, but, mind you, this is a shockin' scandalous place.'

'Out with it!'

'His Nibs.'

'His Nibs?'

'The Guv'nor.'

I sat up.

'That's what they say. Mind you, I've nothing against His Nibs, though he 'as got a face like a bit of plate-glass with a red light behind it. I met plenty of 'is sort in the War, nibblin' their moustaches at a man and puttin' 'im wrong 'owever right 'e might be.'

'Never mind that. What does the Governor want with an old palace when he has the Residency to live in?'

'I can't tell you more'n what's been told me, sir. But I might ask you a question.'

'Well?'

'Ever 'eard of Diana?'

'Diana?'

'Ah, that's a pet name. 'Er real one is Mrs. Nuñez-Unter. Diana was a 'untress, though before our time, I believe, and that's 'ow she came to be so called.'

'Kenedy,' I said, 'have you the smallest idea what you're talking about?'

'I 'ave, sir — but I'm always reluctant to pass on 'earsay about a woman.'

I frowned.

'Are you suggesting that the Governor is buying this house for Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter?'

'That's the idea. I don't b'lieve there's a bit of 'arm in His Nibs, but I've 'ad experience of how a woman'll play a man up. Juno, I reckon my wife knew her 'usband was alive, but did that stop 'er takin' me to the register's? No, sir; it encouraged 'er.'

'Cut all that,' said I, 'and get on with what you were saying.'

'I don't say there's a word of truth in it, but there may be, and if you'd seen Diana as I 'ave, goin' round

in a rickshaw and lookin' for all the world like a burst-up in a paint shop, you'd believe anythink.'

'H'm!'

'You see 'e and 'er was cronies out in Injia and — well, I dare say 'e isn't everybody's money and there never was any accountin' for tastes, and, oh, dear! in a climate like that better men than 'im have made fools of themselves and writ letters they didn't oughter and such. I bin there — I know.'

'You suggest she has a hold on him?'

'For 'is own sake I 'ope not, but the signposts point that way.'

'Kenedy, are you making up all this nonsense?'

'No, sir. I'm repeatin' 'earsay. In this island people live by keepin' each other's secrets or not, as the case may be.'

I rose and pitched my cigarette out of the window. If there was any truth in Kenedy's story, my mission met with a fresh difficulty. Of course it was possible that Sir Francis might be grateful to a purchaser who would buy the property over his head and save him painful expenditure. On the other hand, he might not. For personal reasons I had no wish to prejudice him against me, but I was not on the island for personal reasons. I was there to get our scheme through as best I could, even though my manner of doing so resulted in open conflict with the authorities. I argued that if Sir Francis were a public-spirited man he would not allow a personal grievance to warp his sense of justice and honourable administration. The presumption was perhaps optimistic, but in common fairness it had to be admitted.

'Kenedy,' I said, 'I'm going out and you'd better come too.'

Together we proceeded to King George's Way — the

narrow, winding, main thoroughfare of the town which zigzagged from the shore level to the eminence upon which Government House was situated. A curious street, a hotchpotch of shops and private dwellings, with a sprinkling of cafés, Church Army mission buildings, banks, quartermasters' stores, military headquarters of various units, and Y.M.C.A. huts. Except, perhaps, at Gibraltar, there is no street like it in the world. It combined so many interests, mercantile, military, and residential. It embodied the architectural features of several periods of history. We found the firm of estate agents and auctioneers without difficulty. It boasted the eloquent title of Blasco, Mackintyre & Cohen.

Leaving Kenedy outside, I went in and rattled my cane on the floor. After a little interval a gentleman of sleek and Oriental appearance came from an inner office to inquire my needs. Before addressing me, I had heard him conversing in fluent Spanish, presumably to Señor Blasco. As I did not hear any of the rich accents which flourish north of the Tweed, I assumed that Mr. Mackintyre was not on duty.

'Good-afternoon,' I said. 'Am I speaking to Mr. Cohen?'

'My name is Mackintyre,' he replied in unconvincing Scotch. 'What service can I be to you, sir?'

Concealing my surprise, I stated that I was interested in real estate and should be glad to know if there were any properties on the market that might be suitable as an investment.

'Preferably,' I added, 'something in the Moorish style. I'm not particular as to the state of repair.'

'I'm afraid we have nothing of that kind at present. Of course, if you wished to build I could recommend charming sites.'

He appeared to have forgotten the auction which was to be held on the morrow.

‘How about the palazzo in the old town?’

Mr. Mackintyre showed me the palms of his hands.

‘Oh, no, sir — that would be no use whatever — quite out of the question. The locality!’

‘The locality might improve,’ I suggested.

Mr. Mackintyre shook his head.

‘I could never recommend that.’

‘And yet,’ I said, ‘I take it you are acting for the vendor.’

He did not reply at once. His flickering black eyes were busy taking my measure.

‘Certainly, but that does not place us under any obligation to misrepresent a property to inquirers. One has to consider the reputation of one’s firm.’

I did not want to put the fellow on his guard, so I laughed and observed that it was pleasant to meet so honest a man, adding:

‘If anything comes along you might let me know.’

‘It will be a pleasure to do so, sir. Good-afternoon.’

I gave him the name of my hotel and went out.

‘Kenedy,’ I said, ‘are you any judge of graft?’

‘Graft!’ was the reply. ‘When you’ve been ’ere as long as I ’ave, sir, you’ll know the ’ole island is a sea of it. I reckon this is the general headquarters of the Graft Committee.’

I told him what had taken place.

‘Well?’ said he.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘an auctioneer lives on commission.’

‘Just so, sir; but some ain’t over-particular which side it comes from.’

‘Quite so,’ I nodded. ‘In the meantime it might be as well to advertise our presence as little as possible.’

3

THE following morning, in company with a crowd of casual onlookers, Kenedy and I climbed the steps of the old Moorish palace. The pillared courtyard was in brilliant sunshine on one side and deep in shadow on the other. Perching myself unobtrusively on the sill of a small cusped window in the shadows, I settled down to wait events. Had the palace belonged to me, I should have been disappointed with the type of visitor attracted to the sale. Not a man present looked as if he could raise a couple of florins.

A clock was chiming eleven when Leland Boas and three gentlemen of cosmopolitan appearance pushed their way through the loiterers and occupied chairs before the rostrum. Their backs were toward me, and very sleek backs they were. The appearance at the sale of Leland Boas astonished me as, since my interview with the agent, I had come round to the waiter's belief that for reasons politic his syndicate did not intend to bid. Of course he might have come out of curiosity, but except for a young gentleman of Jewish origin who leaned against a pillar on the other side of the courtyard, tracing the pattern of the tiles at his feet with a point of a cane, there was no one else who looked a likely purchaser. I doubt if I should have noticed this young man had not Boas favoured him with a nod of recognition.

The sale was about to begin. Mr. Mackintyre, faultless, gleaming, and with a rose in his buttonhole, mounted the rostrum and bowed to the company.

'Well, gentlemen,' he said, 'to-day's business won't take long or excite much interest. Every one has had ample opportunity of examining this freehold property, but as a formality I will read the particulars of the sale.'

He did so.

‘There is nothing I wish to add, and I am ready to take your bids.’ A silence followed. ‘Well, shall we start at seven and a half?’

The man who was tracing patterns on the tiles shook his head and murmured:

‘Five hundred.’

‘Oh, come, Mr. Levis, one must do better than that; I have a bid tabled for six hundred.’

‘Six fifty.’

‘I am bid six fifty. I don’t want to inflate my own goods, but a property worth fifteen hundred can’t be sacrificed at that figure. Now, gentlemen.’

An unseen bidder went another point.

‘Fifty better,’ said the gentleman of the cane.

By slow degrees the price rose to eleven hundred. Something persuaded me the limit was being approached. I leant forward and whispered in Kenedy’s ear.

‘Slip round the other side. Whack it up to twelve fifty, then jump two hundred. As long as I leave my stick against this window keep going.’

He vanished and reappeared a minute later on the opposite side of the courtyard.

Meanwhile the bidding reluctantly mounted to twelve hundred and fifty pounds and stuck there.

‘No advance on twelve hundred and fifty. Going at twelve hundred and fifty pounds for the first time — for the second time — for the ——’

‘Fourteen ’undred and fifty pounds,’ said Kenedy, and brought every eye upon him.

Mr. Mackintyre leant forward with an expression of surprise.

‘Whose bid was that?’

‘Mine, sir.’

‘May I ask your name, please?’

‘After the sale I’ll give it to you.’

Mr. Mackintyre flashed a quick glance at Leland Boas, who replied with a slightly negative movement of the shoulders. It is astonishing how expressive a man’s back can be when he is concealing things with his face. It was as though he had said:

‘I don’t know the fellow. He’s nothing to do with us.’

Mr. Mackintyre stooped and spoke to his clerk. He seemed uncertain how to proceed. The young man with the cane used one of his black eyebrows as a question mark. In answer a bearded man sitting next to Boas raised one joint of the forefinger of his left hand.

It was a small gesture, but it started the bidding again as a touch on a trigger explodes a cartridge.

‘Fifteen hundred.’

‘Seventeen hundred,’ said Kenedy composedly.

‘Seventeen fifty.’

‘Two thousand,’ said Kenedy, with whom arithmetic was not a strong point.

Again there was a pause — long enough, in a reputable auction, for the lot to have been knocked down. I had been watching the gentleman with the cane and I did not see the slip of paper which was handed up to Mackintyre. He read it in the palm of his hand and nodded.

‘I am afraid, sir,’ he said, ‘I cannot accept that bid without some knowledge of the identity of the bidder. The procedure may strike some of you as strange, but I think you will agree I am justified when I say that the bidder is known to be a person of no fixed employment, who has been loitering about this town for the past six months. I ask him to deny that accusation.’

At this point I slipped from the window-sill and

breasted my way through the crowd to the open space below the rostrum.

'This man,' I said, 'is my servant and is acting on my instructions. I must ask you, Mr. Auctioneer, to accept the bid.'

Leland Boas concealed his surprise marvellously well. After the first start of recognition his face became entirely impassive. He nodded a greeting at me. Mr. Mackintyre, on the other hand, betrayed some consternation.

'This is all very well,' he said, 'but beyond the fact that you called upon us yesterday, I know nothing about you.'

'That,' I returned, 'may be a matter for satisfaction with both of us. If you want my credentials, Mr. Boas will be happy to give them to you.'

Leland Boas smiled agreeably.

'It is true,' he said with great courtesy. 'I met Mr. Praed in France, but I doubt if so short an acquaintance justifies me in saying more than that.'

'Still,' said I, 'it will be enough to allow us to proceed with the sale. As I remember, my last bid was for two thousand pounds. If there is any competition, I shall be happy to improve upon it.'

Mr. Mackintyre whispered something over his shoulder and picked up his hammer. I had a partially eclipsed impression of a man slipping away behind the rostrum. Of this I should have been more sure had I not been looking at the forefinger of the gentleman who was sitting beside Leland Boas. It had crooked upward again.

The young man with the cane said:

'Guineas.'

'And five hundred better,' said I.

We had reached the three thousand five hundred

mark when a disturbance occurred. A young man with inky fingers and without a hat pressed forward and held up a telegram to the auctioneer.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, and read its contents. Then he looked up and faced us.

‘Gentlemen, I regret to say I have here a cable from the vendor instructing me not to proceed with the sale. It is my duty, therefore, to withdraw the present lot and apologize for the trouble that has been caused to you. I wish you good-day.’

It was unlucky that while pretending to read the wire the sun should have been behind him. The strong rays piercing the paper showed it to be innocent of any written matter whatsoever.

I passed out into the street, reflecting that with a little imagination a man can see anything, but it took more than a little imagination to fathom the inner workings of that particular auction. One thing was obvious; my intrusion had completely upset somebody’s apple cart. But whose?

At a touch on the sleeve I turned and found Leland Boas standing beside me. He was the very pattern of smiling affability.

‘So you decided, after all, to pay us a visit, and I see you’ve not lost much time trying to obtain a stake in the island.’

‘As satire, Boas,’ I replied, ‘that remark is not inspired.’

‘Satire — rubbish — a mere observation, my dear chap. But, you know, I can’t help feeling that your action was a little injudicious. I expect you thought that I wanted the property myself. You were entirely wrong. I wasn’t in the running. If I had been you would have heard some brisker bidding.’

‘In which case,’ said I, ‘the vendor, perhaps, would

have not been obliged to withdraw the lot on a blank telegraph form.'

Leland Boas shook his head over me.

'What eyes!' said he, 'but in some certain localities it is healthier to use smoked glasses. There are times when one can see altogether too much. Well, good-bye. I have a furnished villa on the Shelf. You must come and dine one night.'

He got into a carriage in which his friends were waiting.

'That gentleman a very particular friend of yours, sir?' asked Kenedy.

'Not very,' I answered. 'Why?'

'I was thinkin' 'e 'ad a lovely dial to put it across. It 'ud mark a treat of almonds.'

I agreed heartily.

4

GOVERNMENT HOUSE at Ponta Rica occupies the finest site on the island. It is perched on a shelf of the hillside and surrounded by a white crenellated wall splashed as with wine by patches of purple bougainvillea. The Residency, which is fort-like in appearance, is a low, two-story building with a great veranda on three sides and a stepped garden at the rear. At the main entrance there is a parade of white posts and chains, ancient pieces of artillery, stone cannon-balls, sentry-boxes, and notice-boards. In contrast with this display of military precision is the wild luxuriance of trees, palms, and flowers in the garden beyond.

A delicious fragrance of roses and orange blossom, freshened by sea breezes, filled my nostrils as I walked up the path to the house. I had been stopped by a sentry at the gates, and at the front door a second

sentry inquired the nature of my business. It was all very official. I presented my card and was shown into an ante-room.

Herein I found a young man seated at a table. He rose, offered me a chair and gave me a form containing a large number of printed questions.

'If you will kindly fill up that, Mr. Praed,' he said, 'I will see that it is given to the Governor's A.D.C.'

'Is this necessary?' I asked. 'His Excellency has promised me an interview at noon.'

The young man, who had merry eyes and a pleasant expression, shrugged his shoulders and pulled down the corners of his mouth.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but every one has to do it. It 'ud be as much as my job is worth to let you through without filling up that paper. I'm not much of a red-tape merchant myself, but you know what it is.'

There was something in his manner which inspired my liking.

I said:

'Very well,' and got to work.

There were two pages of questions on that infernal paper and I wasted minutes making the correct answers.

'Thanks,' he said when I had done. 'I'll be as quick as I can, and, by the way, in case you think of having a smoke, I shouldn't do it. The old man's terribly down on smoke, and he's as likely to see you in this room as anywhere else.'

The suggestion was so obviously well intentioned as to leave no room for offence.

'Right,' I laughed. 'Would it be advisable to stand to attention on the off-chance of being taken unawares?'

He returned the laugh, but added:

'Not a bad notion.'

He left me then and returned slightly crestfallen about five minutes later.

'I'm most frightfully sorry, but the old man said you were eleven minutes late and so you must wait until he's through with his next appointment.'

'Did you tell him I came here before twelve and have been filling up that silly-ass paper ever since?'

'I did not, sir, and if you would like to know why, it's because I'm not such a complete fool as I look.'

His manner was extraordinarily disarming, but nevertheless I was riled.

'What is his next appointment?' I asked.

'Lunch,' came the prompt reply.

'He didn't suggest I should join him?'

'He never suggests any one joining him. He takes lunch seriously and alone. Tell you what, Mr. Praed, you don't seem to have got the strength of our Governor. You might find it illuminating to take a squint at him before you meet. You'll think it frightful cheek of me to say that, perhaps, but a good many men have tumbled down heavily by getting on the wrong side of his temper.'

'So I believe,' said I; 'but it's not a personal success I'm aiming at. I'm presenting myself with a letter of introduction from the Colonial Secretary, and I'm not enthusiastic about being treated as if I were here to clean the windows.'

He threw back his head and laughed.

'That's a beauty, Mr. Praed, but honestly I advise you to shoot it off at me beforehand. Otherwise you'll never get a hearing.' He was on the point of saying more when a clink of crockery from the veranda attracted his attention. He beckoned me to the window, the lower frame of which was covered with gauze.

‘He’s just going to begin. Pull a chair over here and you’ll see him without being seen.’

Out of curiosity I complied. A table had been laid on the veranda, and beside it a servant in livery stood to attention. He became, if possible, even more rigidly attentive as a man, dressed in diplomatic blue, came along the veranda with swift, dry steps. General Sir Francis Prothero was of middle height and as lean as a desert dog. His face, which in some obscure way reminded me of anchovy sauce, was as pink and stiff as a prawn. The skin was drawn tightly over sharp bony contours. Beside the corners of his mouth, a feature which looked as though it had been made by a single knife-cut, were two deep seams which ran down beyond the angle of his jaw and were lost in the stringy ligaments of his neck. His hair was sparse and grew far back above the dome of his forehead. He wore a thin and narrow moustache at which he nibbled continuously. Bristling brows overwhelmed a pair of glittering eyes which looked like drops of salt water caught by the sun in rock pools. There was no disputing his good looks or the quality of his soldierly bearing. There was, however, something slightly ridiculous about the man — he seemed too fierce to be real — too exact to be convincing. He was all edge like a razor thinned by too much stropping.

He came to the table, flicked out a folded napkin as though it were a whip, cast his eyes over the ingredients for a salad arranged on a dumb waiter, and pointed at them with an accusing forefinger.

‘Chives,’ he said. ‘Where are the chives? How many times am I to insist on there being chives?’

‘I am sorry, Sir Francis.’

‘Damn your sorrow. Where’s the gardener?’

‘I instructed him to stand by, Sir Francis.’

'Told him to stand by. Told! You tell; I instruct. Fetch him. Go on.'

The servant retired, leaving the Governor of Ponta Rica to engage in the solemn rite of preparing a salad. While doing so he talked to himself testily.

'Lettuce is too green — much too green. Has the damn fool put sugar on the table — no — yes.'

Meanwhile he tore the lettuce into fragments, casting aside the green leaves and retaining only the broken heart. This he screwed up in his napkin and beat against the side of the table.

The servant returned.

'I have sent for the gardener, sir. He'll be here directly.'

The Governor made no reply; he was busy atomizing a hard-boiled egg.

He said:

'Put that lettuce in the bowl.'

It was done and the chopped egg and a sprinkling of tarragon was added. Next came the tremendous affair of making the dressing. Pepper, salt, a speck of vinegar in a spoon, and a whole bottleful of oil poured from a great height.

The gardener, a big, broad-beamed Lancastrian, arrived as the Governor began to beat and bruise the contents of the bowl.

It was interesting to note that he did not allow the man's arrival to interfere with the more important task of pummelling the lettuce.

'Chives,' he said. 'Perhaps you'll tell me you don't know what chives are. Perhaps you don't know that without chives you can't make a salad. Very well, then, grow some. D'ye hear, and see that I'm served with the little shoots cut above the bulb. Understand? And grow some chervil too.'

‘Aye, sir; but them tubas don’t flourish too well in this ’ere ——’

‘Don’t argue — grow chives — that’s your business — and chervil. If you can’t do it, we’ll get somebody who can. That’ll do.’

The gardener retreated, and Sir Francis beat the salad harder than ever.

‘The French are the only people who understand a salad,’ he said. ‘I must get a Frenchman. I can’t be bothered to spend a quarter of an hour every day beating up this damned stuff. Give me some sugar. Why can’t you make a salad? You can’t. Ignorance is at the bottom of it — ignorance and no palate. You don’t even know why I beat the stuff.’

‘I believe, Sir Francis, it’s to extract the flavour of the lettuce.’

‘*C’est pour fatiguer la laitue.* To tire it. Give me a thin slice of York ham.’

By comparison with the elaborate preparations he had made, Sir Francis took a very short time to dispose of his lunch. The man was an epicure, but not a gourmand. He ate like a bird and took but a couple of sips at a glass of iced hock.

When he had finished he rose, touched his mouth with a corner of his napkin, threw it away, and lit a cigarillo as long as a lead pencil.

‘I’m going to my room. Tell Captain Craven I’ll see Mr. Praed. Coffee, when he’s gone.’

He vanished like a dry leaf blown across the street.

5

My future father-in-law, as I could not help regarding him, was seated behind an office table when my young friend of the ante-room showed me in.

The table was impressive, vast, and orderly. It boasted a trio of baskets labelled IN, OUT, and PENDING. In the centre was an inkpot deep enough to plunge a fist into.

He was signing papers when my name was announced, and this he continued to do for some moments after the young man had retired. I shot a glance at the Spartan appointments of the room and noted there was no chair other than the one occupied by Prothero himself.

Having completed signing the papers, he packed them and pitched them into the OUT basket, ran a thumb over his upper lip, and looked up at me, nibbling his moustache.

‘Mr. Nigel Praed?’

‘Yes, Your Excellency.’

‘Exactly. You have come with an introduction from the Secretary of State for the Colonies?’

I nodded.

‘I have other letters.’

‘Why were they not sent in?’

‘They relate to my business, sir, and I preferred to hand them to you personally.’

‘It is a matter of precedent rather than of preference, Mr. Praed. They should have been sent in with your other papers.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

He pushed back his chair and stubbed out his cigar-end in an ash-tray.

‘I believe you arrived here on Thursday?’

‘Yes, that is so.’

‘But you did not ask for an appointment until yesterday. Why?’

‘I wanted to have a look round the island before seeking an interview. I needed first-hand information.’

'Was it also expedient that you should engage in property deals before presenting yourself?'

'Has the one anything to do with the other?' I asked. 'As a British subject surely I am entitled to bid at a public auction.'

Sir Francis bushed his brows at me and rapped a fountain-pen on the table-top.

'It was a breach of etiquette — both military and civil.'

'In that case, sir, I apologize.'

'You are not a military man, Mr. Praed?'

'I am not a professional soldier, sir, although I held a commission in the Engineers in 'fourteen.'

'You were with them throughout the War?'

'No, sir, I left them in January, 'fifteen.'

'Wounded?'

'No, sir.'

'Eh! You were transferred?'

'I had other employment.'

He fixed me with a suspicious eye.

'What employment?'

I had had enough of these interrogations.

'Employment of a private nature, sir. But I assure you it has no relation to my present business, which is purely commercial.'

'As was possibly your employment from 'fifteen onwards.'

'Possibly, sir.'

He looked at me and saw that I did not mean to be drawn.

'Mr. Praed,' he said, 'I wish to know why you did not come direct to Ponta Rica by the ordinary passenger route.'

'Unfortunately it was closed to me.'

'Closed to you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Steamship companies do not refuse passages to persons of repute.'

'There are sometimes exceptions, Sir Francis.'

'Mr. Praed, it sounds to me as if you were talking nonsense, and suspicious nonsense at that. I would advise you to show more frankness.'

'I shall be as frank as you please, sir. A certain syndicate interested in a development scheme for Ponta Rica was determined, if possible, to prevent my coming here.'

'Prevent your coming?'

'They thought it might be of advantage.'

'Of advantage to Ponta Rica?' he queried.

'No. To themselves, Sir Francis.'

'Rubbish! Never heard such rubbish in my life. I tell you plainly I am not satisfied by your explanations of yourself or your reasons for coming here by the back door.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'My letters of recommendation are above reproach and the firm I represent is of sufficient standing to warrant the hope that you will give me the benefit of the doubt.'

Sir Francis rose and moved towards me.

'I don't like your manner, Mr. Praed, and I don't like the tone you adopt. I am not in the habit of being dictated to.'

'No more am I,' I replied.

'And I don't propose to listen to *tu quoque* insolences.'

It looked as if there were going to be a row, and it was only with difficulty I avoided taking my part in it.

'I am here, sir,' I said, 'on a business matter of national importance, or at any rate of great enough im-

portance for you to give it your consideration, apart from any personal dislike I may have inspired.'

The Governor turned away irritably. It was evident I had stood up to him longer and more steadfastly than he was accustomed to.

'I know something of this business of yours, Mr. Praed, and I tell you plainly it doesn't appeal to me.'

'You know something of it?'

'You heard me say so. Don't repeat my words.'

'But I can hardly see, sir, how that can be the case, since I alone have the authority to put the matter before you.'

He knew well enough he had made a slip, but was too pig-headed to avoid the issue.

'That's not the point. It's my business to receive information as to what is going on around me.'

'Quite so, sir; but information received from rival companies is sometimes inaccurate and always biased.'

He spun round and snapped his jaws like a trap.

'Are you accusing me of bias, Mr. Praed?'

'No, sir. I am merely asking you to give my business your impartial attention.'

'Leave your papers — your proposition. I'll go through it — you shall have my answer in three days.'

His hand went out towards the bell, but before he touched it I had spoken.

'There is another small matter I wish to bring to notice, sir. It relates to a breach of law at an auction sale held in the old town yesterday morning. The bidding having gone beyond a figure which apparently had been previously fixed upon, the lot was withdrawn from the market on the fabricated authority of a wire from the owner. I shall be happy to place full details of the case in your hands, sir, as I propose to institute

proceedings against the agents for conveyance of the property to myself.'

Sir Francis looked at me coldly, but underneath I could see he was boiling.

'No action will be taken in this matter,' he replied. 'The breach of law is entirely technical. I consider the agent acted with good sense and public spirit in refusing to accept bids from a stranger whose *bona fides* were unestablished.'

'My *bona fides* having been established,' I replied, 'may I ask that steps will be taken for the re-auction of that property?'

'That rests with the vendor and not with me.'

'Very well,' I said. 'I will cable my company's lawyers to inquire into his intentions.'

'You don't know who the vendor is,' he replied sharply, then added: 'You can do what you please. I have no more to say.'

'One question, Sir Francis. Before the site of the old town is disposed of, may I have your assurance that I shall be informed of any offers that may be made, in order that I may improve upon them on behalf of my company. I feel that the Public Trustee should know that Ribault, Zealer & Palatine have placed no limit on the sum they are prepared to pay for possession of the site. Lately there has been a great deal of comment in the press at home regarding the cost of maintaining Ponta Rica on its present purely military basis.'

'I am not concerned with comments of the press, Mr. Praed. I am only concerned in advising Parliament to accept whatever offer seems most likely to contribute to the prosperity of this island. In those circumstances I shall not be influenced by price dimensions, but by future advantage.'

'Why, then, sir,' said I, 'I can confidently rely on

your approval of our scheme, which not only will supply a source of revenue in times of peace, but a fighting one in times of war, which will make Ponta Rica one of the greatest sea fortresses of the world.'

Sir Francis returned to his chair, where he sat testily folding and unfolding a corner of the blotting-paper. He appeared to be wrestling with a problem outside the one of how quickest to rid himself of me.

'Perhaps,' he said grudgingly, 'it would save time if you gave me an outline of this scheme. Afterwards I can study the matter in detail from your papers.'

'Thank you, sir,' said I. 'May I sit down?'

'Why? Are you tired, Mr. Praed? If so, you are probably in no state to represent your case to the best advantage. I do not like sedentary people.'

It was all I could do to prevent myself laughing.

'Of course, sir, if I command your attention better by standing, I will willingly do so.'

Sir Francis grunted and touched one of a row of bell-pushes on the table.

A door behind his table opened and an officer wearing the uniform of a captain in the Fusiliers came in and clicked his heels.

'That you, Craven?' said the Governor. 'I must have touched the wrong bell. I wanted an orderly — a chair for this gentleman.'

'I'll see to it, sir.'

'Yes. Er — Craven.'

'Sir.'

'This is Mr. Nigel Praed.'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'Captain Craven, my aide-de-camp.'

Captain Craven shook hands with me. It struck me he was taking very particular stock of my features. The impression was so strong that I returned his stare

with interest, and in so doing a half-flash of recognition came to both of us — came and went — losing itself in puzzled lines. In some not very distant past I was certain I had met this young soldier, but for the life of me I could not recall when or where. Coupled with the impression was a certainty that the circumstances in which we had met were strange and distorted. He had a relation to something painful. His searching blue eyes resting upon mine stirred me with a feeling of discomfort that I could not explain.

‘Are you acquainted?’ Sir Francis rapped out.

‘N-no, sir,’ came the doubtful reply, ‘and yet there is something about Mr. Praed that’s familiar to me. I am almost certain I have never heard his *name* before. Well, perhaps it will come back. I’ll send in an orderly with a chair, sir.’

He clicked his heels and went to the door. Across the back of his head was a white scar over which the hair grew thinly. I knew he would have a scar.

The chair was brought in and I drew it up to the table.

I believe I explained the principles of our scheme clearly and with brevity. I must give Sir Francis credit for hearing me without interruption.

When I had finished I handed him the letters from the First Sea Lord and the Air Marshal. He read them in silence.

‘That, sir,’ I said, ‘concludes our case, except, of course, the financial side, which is open to discussion.’

Sir Francis nibbled his moustache for a full minute before offering an opinion.

‘Why,’ he asked, ‘have you fixed on the site of the old town for the aërodrome?’

‘Nowhere else is suitable.’

‘And nowhere else suitable for the development of a

new residential area. And nowhere else suitable for a parade ground for drilling troops.'

'The traffic of 'planes would not be so continuous as to preclude troops from drilling on the aërodrome.'

'By arrangement, I suppose, with a commercial company?' His tone was bitter.

'Why not, as part of the terms on which the ground is allotted?'

'Humph! An aërodrome would mean the erection of hangars and sheds.'

I nodded.

'Where do you propose to put them?'

'Under the shelter of the cliff.'

'Precisely — and destroy the whole of my firing curtains.'

'That would hardly matter in times of peace, sir. In war, when the air force took over, they would provide their own defence against naval attack.'

'I see, Mr. Praed, you are one of those cranks who believe the aëroplane is a match for the superdread-nought.'

'I believe it will prove a better match in future warfare than a few shore batteries that can be knocked out by night fire at fifteen miles' range.'

'Ah! and cannot the weapon that does that blow your precious hangars to pieces and fire every oil and spirit tank in the island? Then where should we stand, eh, with the whole island enveloped in black smoke? The tanks would be the target, Mr. Praed, and once they went up not a gun would be able to fire a round.'

'The tanks,' I replied, 'would be sunk in twenty-five feet of solid rock, with nothing but feed pipes on the surface.'

He rose and paced the room.

'Ponta Rica,' he said, 'is not a naval base and not an

air-force base — it is a military station, and as long as I have any say in the matter it will remain a military station. I will be no party in letting it become a pawn for commercial enterprises to squeeze out dividends for fat-bellied business men. Ponta Rica belongs to the War Office and not the Stock Exchange. It is a fortress, not a bucket shop. This jargon about handing it over to the Air Force in the event of war is a bait invented by Jews. One of the only statesmen worthy of the name in the last half-century told us to think imperially — and, by Gad, Mr. Praed, that's what I am going to do.'

Argument only bred opposition in Sir Francis Prothero. He was falling back on his own obstinacy.

'And is it, sir,' I replied, 'an act of imperialism to turn a military fortress into a cheap gambling hell?'

'What do you mean?'

'Just that. I imagine, sir, Ponta Rica will be a popular station for young officers with money to burn. When your imperial spirit has encouraged you to countenance the erection of a *plage*, a big white casino, and a district of villas for the accommodation of an overflow of professional gamblers and Continental demi-mondaines, you will have reason to be proud of the monument you have helped to erect to the military efficiency of Great Britain.'

I fully expected he would tear me to shreds after that, but he did no such thing. He looked me up and down with a supremely cynical smile.

'You are a prig,' he said, 'and of all things in the world I have the greatest contempt for a prig.'

'I'm neither a prig nor a hypocrite,' I replied. 'I like Monte Carlo, Cannes, San Sebastian, as well as another man. It doesn't matter to me whether England puts up a roulette parlour on the end of the Brighton Pier. But I'm not going to pretend by doing

so she is adding to her national efficiency and prestige, and certainly I am not going to talk about imperial thinking, with one eye on a baccarat table and the other on a bunch of Mediterranean speculators who put the roof over it and fatten on what they can squeeze out of the *cagnotte*.'

He crossed to the table, and as he passed me I had an impression that a sudden weariness had come over him.

'I will not detain you any longer, Mr. Praed,' he said. 'Leave those papers, please, and in the course of a few days you will hear my intentions. As I suppose you will be cabling your directors in regard to this interview, you may say that in my opinion they could hardly have chosen a more unsuitable representative.'

'May I add, Sir Francis, that you would wish to express your gratitude to Mr. Leland Boas for helping you to form that amiable opinion?'

The Governor of Ponta Rica opened his mouth in amazement and then shut it again. In his eyes shone a light which in another man I should have taken for humour, but which I now suppose was the light of battle.

'Mr. Praed,' he said, 'I almost like you — you're so damned insolent. Perhaps I should like you if common sense didn't persuade me you were three parts fool and one part adventurer. In my position one is accustomed to having one's own way without argument. You provide me with an opportunity of having my own way plus the argument.'

'I see, sir; then I can count on your decision being governed by personal grounds?'

'And suppose that should be so — do you feel yourself big enough to interfere?'

'I am not taking no for an answer, Sir Francis.'

‘Yes, you look the sort of man who would run his head against a wall.’

‘Perhaps I am, sir. Not long ago I was told that, in respect of obstinacy, you and I had much in common.’

The Governor laughed thinly.

‘And who told you that?’

‘Your daughter Philida.’

‘My daughter!’ he repeated. ‘I was wondering if you would have the nerve to speak of her.’

‘Why not?’ I replied. ‘One day I hope to persuade her to be my wife.’

‘Poor young man!’ said he. ‘Did I say three parts fool? I should have said all fool.’

He spoke softly, but there was a kick in his voice — like a kick from a mule.

‘It needed something of the kind to round off this interview. I’m obliged, Mr. Praed. You are very generous at giving away munitions.’

‘I have told you no more than you already knew. If as a result you allow judgment to be warped by a personal antagonism, you may have some difficulty in convincing the Government that you have acted impartially.’

‘He threatens,’ said the Governor.

‘Not a threat, sir — a warning. I believe in the virtue of that scheme, and I believe one day I shall marry Philida. I don’t mind who goes to the wall so long as I carry both beliefs to a successful conclusion. You are welcome to any guns I may have provided.’

‘Would you call it tit for tat, Mr. Praed, or by the simpler name of blackmail?’

‘I should call it common sense.’

‘There is no doubt,’ said he, ‘you would have made a capital lawyer. We must have another talk before you return to England.’

'I am at your service, sir.'

He rose and touched a bell. An orderly came in and saluted.

'Show this gentleman out.'

In the ante-room my young friend the under-secretary rose to greet me.

'Either you've made a big hit or a tremendous failure,' he said. 'No one ever stayed so long before.'

He handed me a chit.

'Pass out,' he explained. 'Another of our Forms and Ceremonies. The guard wouldn't let you go without it.'

I thanked him and also for the courtesy he had shown to me.

'Don't name it — we've been having a sleek crew up here lately and it's a joy to meet some one who looks like a public-school man. If you're dull in the evenings, drop round to Ypres Club for a smoke and a game of pills. My name's Chalice — Hugh Chalice.'

'Love to.'

'That's a bet, then. Any old night after nine.'

'By the way,' I asked, 'who is Captain Craven?'

'He's the A.D.C. Quite a stout lad. Acts as a memory bureau for the old man. He's an astonishing facility for recalling faces and names. Never forgets. Why?'

'I'd an idea we'd met before.'

'If that's so, he'll be certain to tell you where sooner or later. Well, so long.'

'So long,' I repeated.

As I passed down the avenue to the gates, I had a glimpse of the Governor and Craven. A fragment of their talk drifted my way.

'Obstinate — cheek of the devil. I didn't altogether dislike him, but I felt I wanted to break the beggar.'

And Craven's:

'Yes, sir. I wish I could place where it was.'

His back was toward me, with the scar plainly visible. Inside my brain was a gathering conviction that by some contrivance, willing or unwilling, I had given him a wipe across the head and he owed the scar to me.

6

BACK at the hotel I was occupied for an hour writing and coding a report to Ribault of all that had taken place since I landed at Ponta Rica. I did not disguise the fact that things had gone none too well or that the reception of our scheme had been hostile.

'We are up against pig-headedness and personal complications on the one side,' I wrote, 'and a slippery crew of Continental financiers on the other. We shall find ourselves opposed by obstacles at every turn. Sir Francis is definitely antagonistic to me and asks me to tell you that he thinks I'm rotten. In these circumstances you may feel it would be advisable to send another representative. For my own part I am wholeheartedly anxious to carry on, but you may not care to take the risk.'

I hated sending this advice, but somehow I was easier in my mind after the cable had gone. In common fairness I could not disguise Sir Francis's animosity. Old Ribault, I knew, would stick to me through thick and thin, but there were others on the Board who might not hold the same views. Besides, I never had much use for the optimistic prospector who writes up his case in rose-coloured ink.

On my way back from the post-office I bought a copy of the Ponta Rica newspaper — a one-sheet affair, which dealt mainly with matters of local interest, mil-

itary news in the form of Part II Orders, and a column of wires supplied by an international Press Bureau.

Thus I learnt that the Conservatives were in with a large majority. This was a circumstance that might seriously affect our projects, since the new Gaming Acts were a Conservative measure which had only been flirted with by the previous Government. And then suddenly I saw Philida's name.

Miss Philida Prothero, the daughter of General Sir Francis Prothero, K.C.M.G., D.S.O., is aboard the *Mariana*, and will land in Ponta Rica at 10.30 A.M. to-morrow. Miss Prothero, who will be accompanied by Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, has been taking an extensive tour on the Continent. She will be assured of a very hearty welcome.

Never was a truer word printed. I dropped the paper in my lap and stretched my arms above my head. As I did so I saw Leland Boas coming down the steps from the heights.

To judge from his expression he had recently been involved in an unpleasant interview. The tolerant and half-pitying smile was absent, and instead he regarded me with contracted brows and half-closed eyes like a marksman taking a sight.

'Have you found a stool of repentance, Praed,' he asked, 'to think over the error of your ways? What a mess you have made of things, to be sure! Nobody likes you. It is the same story wherever you go. Unpopular — unpopular.'

I took a shot in the dark.

'Don't tell me that I failed to make an agreeable impression on His Excellency the Governor. Don't tell me that.'

'I fear so,' he replied. 'Yes, even the Governor failed to perceive your charms.'

'And is it sympathy for my failure that has excited your grief and anxiety, Boas?'

'Grief — anxiety?' he repeated.

'Certainly. I never saw you so depressed. Unless I knew it were impossible I should begin to think His Excellency had been putting you through the hoops.'

Leland Boas checked a retort.

'I am going to talk to you,' he said, — 'a straight and practical talk. You're a nuisance — not you as you, but you as representing a firm that is too big to be ignored.'

'That sounds uncommonly like a quotation,' said I. 'The Governor might have made just such a statement.'

'Perhaps he did, Praed. Perhaps that is why I am talking to you now. What do you stand to make out of this deal?'

'A little less than you would be prepared to pay me to make a mess of it.'

'That's a very sensible answer, Praed, as I'll prove to you.'

'Well, go ahead.'

'To-morrow the Mariana will be arriving from England.'

'Just so — with a very angry lady on board who will want to know why the sale has fallen through.'

'How did you know that?' he exclaimed unguardedly, giving me just the information I wanted.

'Well, never mind,' said I; 'let's have your proofs.'

'Perhaps it doesn't matter. The ship arrives, as I said, to-morrow, and after a cruise round the islands returns here, and sails for England four days later. In the ordinary course of events she will have on board a messenger from His Excellency with a communication advising the Cabinet to accept a certain offer for the purchase of real estate.'

‘Would it not be nearer the truth to say the communication will deal with *two* offers and will leave the decision in the hands of the Cabinet?’

‘I do not think there will be two offers — if a little common sense can be drummed into your head.’

‘Drum away,’ said I.

‘In the first place, I am only discussing an open secret in saying that His Excellency is in rather an embarrassed position.’

‘That comes of keeping bad company,’ said I. ‘*Noscitur ex sociis.*’

Boas ignored my Latin, and went on:

‘He is embarrassed financially — and also on a point of reputation.’

‘Please remember,’ I said, ‘I have not asked for these confidences.’

‘His Excellency is a born gambler and, where women are concerned, rather an ass. In other words, he loses his head. You remember Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter ——’

‘Just a minute,’ I interrupted. ‘It is possible, Boas, you have no reason for loyalty to the Governor except for what you hope to get out of him. I, on the other hand, rather like the old boy, and I have a very particular reason to be as loyal to him as I can.’

‘What reason?’

‘Didn’t you know I was going to marry his daughter?’

Boas’s face went an unpleasant colour, but he kept his temper.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘it is a little premature to discuss that. There are more immediate matters that command our attention. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, as I was about to tell you, is in possession of certain letters from the Governor which the dissolute fellow actually wrote before the decease of her late husband. Very naturally

she has kept them, to use as occasion demands. I do not think she wants a husband, Praed, but she wants a position — a *belle maison* and those few creature comforts dear to persons of advancing years. Unfortunately, the Governor's purse is not long enough to supply all these requirements.'

'And that,' said I, 'is where you come in.'

'That,' said he, 'is where you, if you have any sense at all, will go out. The Governor is very jealous of his position — a position which would not be strengthened by the vulgarities of a case for breach of promise. Do I make myself clear?'

'Lucid; but if this is the only difficulty, what is to prevent my firm from offering the lady a handsome reward to remove herself and her obstacles?'

Leland Boas shook his head.

'My dear fellow, you look with one eye. It is not merely cash she wants, but position. She sees herself society queen of what will become a super-Riviera resort. A villa overlooking a flying-ground would prove a very poor substitute. The lady hunts lions, not birds of the air. She has visions of kings and princes at her table — not of blue-dungareed mechanics. Oh, no, Praed, there are no short cuts to success in what I have told you.'

'Except my own personal success?'

'Just so.'

'Well?'

'Continue, my dear fellow, to make a mess of things for another fortnight and then report to your firm that the affair is hopeless.'

'And then?'

'You will find you have made a lot of money and a number of friends.'

'May I ask whether the Oriental and Teutonic-look-

ing gentlemen with whom you seem on such excellent terms will be of the number?’

‘There will be a variety to choose from.’

‘It sounds delightful,’ said I, ‘but in my present employment there is no obligation for me to know any of these gentlemen. I might not like them, Boas.’

‘I am making a business proposal — you can take it or leave it. But if you leave it, Praed, you will find life very far from agreeable. There is too much at stake for one man’s interference to be tolerated.’

‘Meaning that I may look forward to a knock on the head?’

‘We might even devise something subtler than that.’

‘It’s a curious thing, Boas,’ said I, ‘but you seem to be taking me very seriously all of a sudden.’

His reply was impressive.

‘Once a sparrow stopped Big Ben. It was dead when they got it out. Think over what I’ve said before sending word to your firm.’

‘Too late,’ I said. ‘I cabled them half an hour ago.’

Leland Boas tapped his cane against the toe of his shoe, what time he looked at me with his searching, half-closed eyes which reminded me of a marksman taking a sight. Then, jerking his head, he walked briskly away. Viewed in retreat, there was something Hunnish in the white, smooth curve of neck which appeared above the line of his collar. I had never noticed that before, and, seeing it for the first time, I had a job to prevent myself helping him down the worn steps with a kick in the back.

7

THERE was bunting in the windows. Flags and streamers spanned King George’s Way. A battalion of scavengers had been busily employed in sweeping the

pavements and collecting the paper and peel which littered the town. As the Mariana steamed into the bay a salute was fired from a battery on the cliff, and a brass band on the quay struck up a lively martial air.

At eleven o'clock a mounted escort went by, preceding a carriage in which were the Governor and his A.D.C. He was followed by the Chief of Police on a grey horse of doubtful temper. Next came a platoon of infantry, very shiny as to buttons and boots — fine-looking boys who marched like a single man. The procession ended in an odd assortment of cars, carriages, and hired cabs. In one of the cars I saw Leland Boas. He wore a morning coat and a silk hat and looked particularly perfect. On the seat beside him was a bouquet of flowers.

The last of the hired cabs being without a fare, I hailed him and, without waiting for his assent or refusal, hopped in and joined the procession. The driver turned out to be the fellow who had taken me round the old town on the day of my arrival.

He was delighted to renew the acquaintance, and asked me over his shoulder if I had a pass to the quay. Hearing I had not, he shook his head and assured me I should not be allowed to enter, adding, as a cheerful afterthought, 'unless for ten shillings.'

I told him I was good for that, and he drove on optimistically.

Sure enough, at the dock gates we were stopped by a policeman, who succumbed at once to the ten-shilling note.

The Mariana had dropped anchor by the head of the mole. A steam tender was alongside, but so far no passengers had been taken aboard.

His Excellency the Governor alighted from his car-

riage, was joined by two members of the executive council and Leland Boas. They went down a flight of carpeted steps to a white motor-launch, in which a crew of four was standing to attention. The band started to play as the motor-boat churned up the glassy waters of the little harbour. A destroyer dipped a flag in salute. The launch came alongside the liner, and the Governor and some of his party went aboard.

I had managed to worm my way through the crowd to the red cord which formed a barrier at the head of the landing-steps, and here, highly unpopular with a gentleman I had dispossessed, I waited events.

And presently I saw Philida. She was at least three hundred yards away, but I must have recognized her at three miles. She was dressed in white. I saw her throw out a hand to the liner's captain with that quick, impulsive gesture of hers — half boyish, almost awkward in its suppleness. Then both hands went above her head in a flickering farewell to friends of the voyage. Next moment she was coming down the companionway at her father's side. Leland Boas, waiting below in the motor-launch, pressed forward with an offer of help, which she either did not notice or ignored. Without touching his proffered arm she sprang aboard and went forward on the tiny deck. Boas followed, and with a stiff bow presented his flowers. Her hesitation was unmistakable, but with the eyes of so many focused upon her she must have thought it impolitic to refuse. Gladly I would have torn those flowers to pieces petal by petal.

A flower girl was standing near me with a great basket of pig lilies and roses. I called her over and gathered up an armful.

'Scatter the rest at the top of the steps,' I said.

I cannot attempt to describe my feelings as the

launch came alongside and disappeared from view under the shelter of the high sea wall.

The Chief of Police, a few officers and dignitaries of the island, gathered round the head of the steps. I saw Philida's face rise up through a palisade of very straight legs and then appear between the heads and shoulders of those who had pressed forward to welcome her. As she stood shaking hands her eyes travelled round in a half-circle as though in search of some one she could not find.

I needed no more by way of excuse. Lifting the rope with my free hand I slipped beneath it. A sentry tried to check me, but I dodged him and got through to the front rank, to the astonishment of the onlookers. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter was first to see me, and I saw her speak a quick word to the Governor.

One of the officers turned with 'Look here, sir ——'

But I didn't bother about him. Philida was within a yard of me.

When she saw who it was she broke into a smile that was nearly a laugh.

'Hullo!' she said. 'I wondered where you were.'

All in white, she stood with Leland Boas's scarlet bouquet stretched along her arm. I came nearer and offered my flowers.

'How lovely!' said she. Then: 'Josephine!'

The scarlet bouquet passed into the keeping of her maid. 'Thank you for these,' and she lifted my flowers to her face. From pure malice I chose that moment to bow a greeting to Boas. He returned it with better grace than it deserved. I could just hear Philida laughing into the ear of the lilies. Then the Governor came forward with a hand stretched out for me to take. I had not suspected him of so much tact.

'Good-morning, Praed,' he said. 'I was forgetting

you and my daughter were acquainted. You should have had an invitation. We shall see you at the reception to-night, I hope.'

'Your Excellency is very kind.'

'Delighted. Come, Philida.'

She put her hand in mine for a moment, then moved away among the clicking of heels and jingling spur chains.

I watched them go, unconscious of Captain Craven, who had stayed and was looking at me with the same puzzled expression of the day before. I turned at the touch of his hand on my sleeve.

'Where was it, Mr. Praed?' he said. 'Be a sportsman and give me a lead.'

I looked at him and shook my head.

'It puzzles me, too.'

'But yesterday when we met I was certain you knew — I've still an idea you know, but for some reason won't say.'

'I'm as much in the dark as you are, Craven. One meets thousands of men.'

'Quite,' he acknowledged, 'but I've made it my business to remember them. Well — well, perhaps it'll pop out one of these days. I must run.'

8

I WAS dressing for dinner that night when Kenedy brought in my English mail. There was a letter from Marian devoted entirely to friendship and praises of Philida, and another from James Ribault concerned with what he had been able to find out about Boas.

There's no doubt in my mind Boas isn't Boas [he wrote]. A Leland Boas went exploring in the Northern Provinces by himself in '13. There are records of him having been seen in various parts of Central Africa in '15, '16, and '17. Then no

one heard anything more about him until he turned up in Nairobi after the Armistice. No doubt this Leland Boas is the man who turned up in Nairobi, but whether he is the man who started from the Northern Provinces is open to doubt. I have the assurance of some one I can trust who claims to have found a wooden cross over a grave in the jungle north of Tanganyika. The cross bore the name L. Boas, died October 10th, 1918. Beside the grave was a picked skeleton, apparently of the white man who'd carved the cross. My informant met Boas some months later on the East Coast, and, being struck by the peculiarity of the name, told him of the grave in the jungle. Boas assured him there must be some mistake, and challenged him to prove his words. There was a bet, and a year later my informant revisited the ground where he had found the grave. But the cross, the grave, and the skeleton had disappeared. If this is true, as I believe, our friend Boas may have taken pains to remove evidence which cast a doubt on his identity. Why? I don't know and can't find out. P'r'aps he has a dirty war record or is wanted in his old name. The story is interesting, but not helpful, and I've wasted a lot of time getting it. Anyway, we won't fight this business by chucking mud about. You may be driven to use weapons of retaliation if they play dirty tricks, but, so far as the job is concerned, we'll stick to sound argument and solid cash and an obstinate determination.

This Government business may complicate our arrangements, and it might be wise to try and hold off any decision till we see how the elections go. I am trying to arrange for a few loud speakers in the House to keep our cause before the public. If the Conservatives get a majority, it'll be anybody's battle, with a shade of favour on the other side on account of the Gaming Act. Try and keep things in the melting-pot and don't get angry if they go against you.

I had just finished reading the letter when Kenedy came in with a visiting-card from Hugh Chalice, my young friend of the ante-room at Government House.

'Fetch him up,' I said.

Hugh Chalice was in evening dress and wore a row of miniature medals on the lapel of his coat.

'Sorry to bother you while you're dressing, Mr. Praed,' said he, 'but I brought along an official invitation for to-night's show.'

I thanked him and pointed to the drinks and a box of cigars.

'Thanks. I'll just have a cigar. I also brought this from Miss Prothero.'

He gave me an envelope and turned away to light his cigar as I broke the seal and read the note.

That welcome of flowers was lovely. I was pleased all through. I knew you would be there. I wanted you to come forward beyond everything, and you did.

I have kept six and eleven for you. We are old-fashioned and have programmes here. Eleven is supper, so we could talk instead.

Father is full of you almost to the extent of eruption. He regards you as his natural enemy. Don't be distressed, because he loves his enemies.

PHILIDA

I tucked the letter away and turned to Chalice, who was smoking by the window.

'It was good of you to bring this along,' I said.

'Yes,' he nodded. 'You've no idea how good.' He made a wry face which broadened into a smile. 'Of course I was delighted. Miss Prothero is a trump, ain't she?'

The sentiment was expressed with too much sincerity to need endorsement. Chalice dropped into a chair and looked at his cigar appreciatively.

'You know a good smoke, Praed,' he said. 'These are the best I've tasted in years. Our climate is punishing to cigars — turns 'em to dust and bitterness. You brought these with you, I suppose.'

I assented.

'It's a favourite brand of mine.'

'No wonder. Marvellous thing a good cigar —

makes a man feel right with the world.' He puffed away in silence while I fixed a white tie before a mirror. I could see the reflection of him looking at me as though he had more to say.

'Well, what is it?' I asked.

'Nothing much. I am wondering if I ought to tell you. Don't see why not, though.'

I supplied an encouraging silence.

'There was no end of a hick-boo up at the House yesterday after you left. Feathers flying in all directions.'

I turned and wagged a finger at him.

'I'm not asking you to disclose any secrets,' said I.

'Tisn't any particular secret. But you know that fellow Leland Boas? Well, he turned up just after you'd gone. As a rule he goes down rather well, but yesterday the old man flew at him in all directions like a split flywheel. It was a devil of a hick-boo! You could have heard it a mile off. "Too much clever business," he kept shouting. "Too much this and too much that, and damned if I don't turn my back on the whole lot of you. You seem to forget this is as much England as the shop at Woolwich." And all the time that sleek swine was trying to pacify him. I don't know your opinion, Praed, but I can't stand for that fellow Boas and I can't get it out of my head that he's trying to involve the old man in something sticky.'

I thought a moment before replying.

'Look here, Chalice, it's natural you should want to blow off steam and I dare say your job induces a pretty good deal of it.'

'I'll tell the world it does.'

'Exactly,' I said, 'but I should screw down the valves. It's friendly of you to made a confidant of me,

but it isn't sound politics. I'd hate you to get into trouble on my account.'

He laughed ruefully.

'I suppose I'm an ass,' he acknowledged, 'but when I like a chap I'm disposed to talk too much. Thanks for the tip. P'r'aps you won't take it amiss if I offer one to you. There are folks here who've got their knife into you. So keep your eyes peeled.'

'They are peeled,' I laughed, 'but thanks all the same.'

He rose and stood on one leg and then on the other.

'I'd better be off. I suppose there isn't an answer to that letter of Miss Prothero's. I think she expected one.'

I sat down and scribbled a note which might perhaps have been of interest to Philida, but certainly to no one else.

'You're a good chap, Chalice,' I said as I gave it to him. 'I should go out by that door, down the service staircase, and through the American bar. This way you have to pass through the hall, where there may be people hanging about.'

'Right, I will.' He stood for a moment and laughed. 'The way you went head first through that crowd on the quay this morning — oh, it was jam! Did you see Boas's face?'

I nodded.

'There was a Hun once who drove his bayonet through my groin. He looked just like that. This door, eh! Goo'-bye.'

THE cream of Ponta Rica society was at Government House that night. The Governor, with Philida on one side and Craven on the other, stood to the right of the

ballroom door. As each guest was announced Craven murmured something in the Governor's ear — little promptings to be used as conversational aids. There were many foreign-looking gentlemen present with splendid rolling names, and also a number of passengers from the Mariana.

The Mariana was due to sail at 6 A.M. for Flores and other places of interest in the Archipelago. She would return to Ponta Rica in four days' time. It was the business of the ship to combine an ordinary passenger service with health cruises.

In the circumstances it was difficult to tell who was of the island and who was not. Craven had his work cut out to identify in that crowd of strangers those about whom something ought to be known.

To the left of the doorway stood Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter. She wore a gown of gold tissue with a green froth of chiffon about her throat. The white face with its dabs of cherry red and its crown of purple hair was nodding greetings to all and sundry. She seemed to have appointed herself senior hostess and was vigorously welcoming each fresh arrival. I judged from the frown on the Governor's brow that the arrangement was neither of his making nor to his liking. Some of the guests were secured by her before he had a chance of greeting them. There was a considerable throng at the doorway, and from my place amongst them I had leisure to observe these things and to mark the expression of disapproval on the faces of some of the ladies.

Presently my name was boomed out by the butler and I found myself shaking hands with His Excellency. I could not swear to it, but I had an impression that there was a flicker of amusement in his eyes as they met mine. However, he said nothing, and I passed on

to greet and be greeted by Philida. It was obviously no moment to stop and talk, for already others were gathering behind me. I confined myself to:

‘Six and eleven.’

She nodded, and I was moving away when arrested by the voice of Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter.

‘Surely it is Mr. Praed. How very rude not to come and pay your respects to me!’

I made a half-circle of the little knot of guests and came to her side.

‘Forgive me,’ I said, ‘but my first duty was to my hostess.’

A shadowy frown playing on the white mask of her face was quickly transformed into a smile.

‘Excuses,’ she said, ‘are the defence of persons without courage, Mr. Praed. Oh, yes. Did you find me so alarming at Hardelet that you are afraid to say how do you do?’

‘I hardly expected you would remember me,’ I replied.

‘I remember every one. So you have made yourself at home in Ponta Rica.’

‘Thanks to the letters of introduction that preceded my arrival,’ said I.

As one brushes away a fly, she turned to dispose of a lady who was trying to speak to her.

‘Oh, yes. Yes, yes. How do you do, yes.’

Then to me again:

‘To show that I at least have nothing but the friendliest feelings, you shall have two dances, Mr. Praed. Write down number six and number eleven.’

I shook my head.

‘Is that friendly,’ I asked, ‘since you knew they had already gone?’

‘How should I know, Mr. Praed?’

'I thought you might have overheard.'

'No. You shall have number seven. There are things I wish to talk to you about.'

I marked my programme, looked up, and found myself confronted by the lovely smiling face of Nancy Vansiter, of Marian's eligible trio at Hardelot.

'Nancy!' I exclaimed. 'This is marvellous.'

'Not marvellous, but simple,' she returned with the smile that showed her perfect teeth, 'and there's no reason to look at me as if I'd been shot up through a star-trap like a pantomime fairy.'

'But what are you doing at Ponta Rica?'

'Taking a look at it. Set your mind at rest if you're afraid I'm playing page to your Wenceslas and following two paces to the rear.'

Her outspoken insolence was delightful.

'I've no such illusions, Nancy, but it's very nice to see you again.'

'The idea is on Philida. She spoke of the beauties of the island, so I figured I'd take a look-see. All knowledge is venerable; the same applies to travel. I've a round ticket on the Mariana, and as I have to be abroad about dawn it would be a pity to let that jazz tune run to waste.'

As we made our way through the crowd to the dancing-floor, Philida threw a smile at me as who should say: 'Jolly, isn't it?'

'Are your people here?' I asked.

'I've no people, 'cept my father, who's in St. Louis, but if it's a chaperon you mean there's a whole ship's company, and I've gone by the twenty-one mark into years of discretion. How are you getting on with marrying Philida?'

'Hush!' I said, 'it hasn't reached the public yet.'

'I believe in saying things through the loud-speaker.'

Philida and I are great friends, and I'd do my best to do her a turn. I told her you kissed me in that Ford car. Do you mind that?'

'I've always been very pleased about it.'

'She seemed pleased, too. Said you'd have been an oil-can if you hadn't.'

I denied that Philida ever said oil-can.

'I can't make up my sentences on your English pattern. Anyway, she said, what else are woods for? Hello! and here's another.'

She turned to greet Leland Boas, who was full of smiles, compliments, and requests for dances. She promised him the next, and we moved off again to the music.

'You and he in some deal together?' she asked.

'On the contrary, we're in opposite camps.'

'I'd have it that way,' she said. 'If I were window-dressing he'd get no centre place. He puts me in mind of a cat in silk socks. Gee! these military bands may fire the patriotic spirit, but they put the snuffer on Terpsichore. Let's have a sweep round for an ice or something.'

We found an ice and took it to the veranda to melt.

'This place gets me wound up,' said Nancy. 'It's drowsy and fierce at the same time. Any sort of thing might happen here, from a flight of angels to a real out-West shoot-up. There's instability in the air. I shouldn't mind putting in a whole week here and making a real study of the atmosphere.'

The music, which had stopped, started again.

'That means I must find my other half, doesn't it? It's an uncivilized way of spending an evening, breaking it into small pieces with a number to each.'

Before she went in she took a sniff of the night scents and nodded at the stars. A splendid, healthy, fearless

girl, unawed by man — nature — or even infinity itself. I felt no harm could come to a woman who could nod at the stars as to a gathering of friends.

I stayed on the veranda smoking until I judged number six was near. They were, however, only approaching the end of number four when I reëntered the ballroom. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter captured me, and I was introduced to several ladies without the option of escape. Never an inveterate dancer, my happiness was not increased by these additions to my programme. Especially was this so in view of the fact that some of the partners thrust upon me were already advanced in that second spring-time which emphasizes its claim to youth by the exercise of violent energies. My partner for number five was full of a dynamic force which even the most vigorous dancing failed to abate. She insisted on taking a hand in the steering, with the result that our divided efforts were a source of tribulation to other couples.

‘Only when we arrive at our time of life,’ she informed me, ‘do we really understand how to enjoy ourselves. Flaming youth is all bunkum.’

I imagine Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter wanted to make me look ridiculous. She certainly succeeded. I felt as if I had been through a thrashing machine when at last I escaped to Philida.

Philida was laughing that silent, happy laugh of hers.

‘Thank Heaven,’ said I ruefully, ‘some one can see the fun of it.’

She slipped an arm through mine.

‘Let me laugh,’ she pleaded. ‘I always do — always have — don’t forbid me ever to laugh at you. Let’s be able to laugh at each other, Nigel, then no harm can come to either of us.’

‘Of course,’ I said, because I always agreed with Philida in all her thrifts and extravagances. ‘What a discoverer you are! How do you know no harm can touch us if we are proof against each other’s laughter?’

‘Because it’s the hardest thing in the world to be. It’s so simple to take sympathy from each other — affection, praise, and all the other things that make people blindly happy. That’s the chloroform all lovers can give, and do give, until they get sick of it. But to love any one with both eyes open and see the funniness as well as the rippingness is much more worth while. The woman is utterly happy who makes a hero of a man and still is able to laugh because his tie is riding up at the back of his collar.’

Instinctively my hand went to my neck.

‘No, not yours — that’s just a symbol. See what I mean, Nigel?’

They were so jolly, these little side-street thoughts of hers that ran this way and that across the main avenues of her mind! Once again I paused in admiration to wonder what complement to herself she could find in me. Beside her I felt fixed and single-purposed, like a man travelling doggedly along a straight line towards a given object. Always in our meetings I was confused and astonished by the way she departed from the main thread and story of our affection for each other, carrying me with her into the strangest asides, of whose existence I had been hardly aware. Her fleet-footed brain travelled faster and reached its destination long before mine. She did not move along the permanent way, but up and down the railway cuttings where the primroses grew and there were glimpses of blue skies above the telegraph wires and the tops of trees.

‘Being with you,’ I said, ‘is like taking a dog for a

walk. He is with you and not with you — he is hidden in ditches and rustles through hedges — he is half a mile away surprising the secret of woods. You hear him in the reeds by the lake, and see him racing his shadow across open spaces. And yet at the end of the journey he's waiting at the gate with a smile of welcome. I have followed the road, and he a trackless imagination. I have seen what is before me and to the right and left, while he has seen and felt and scented every mystery of the landscape.'

She smiled up at me as we danced, pleased at the nonsense I had invented.

'I think that was good, Nigel, and true, for it's easy to run off the main track when one knows that some one in whom one can trust is walking along it. To be sure of that is to be free. I'd hate it if I didn't feel you were clumping along the straight way, for then I'd have to come sedately to your side and take your arm and argue about the turnings. But there's no need. I am sure of you, and so I can run off at will and bring you secrets from the grass and tell you where the berries are reddest, or where a new spring has started on a forest bank, or where the calf lives who has eyes like a dove and a nose as cold as moss.'

'Philida,' I said insanely, 'why can't I thread your words on a string and wear them round my neck and listen to them talking when you are not there? My dear dear, I've missed you terribly.'

'Say that, Nigel — I like to hear you saying that. I'm glad it hurt, though I suppose I should be sorry.'

'Do we meet often now?' I asked. 'Can we meet? Shall you be hedged in? Is this wretched job of mine going to be a barrier between us? Is that tiresome father of yours ——'

'Back from the sublime to the official,' she laughed.

‘Ridiculous, Philida.’

‘It’s much the same thing.’ Then: ‘My dear, how can I say? You are not liked — you know that — your business is not in favour — you know that. But you wanted difficulties, Nigel — rivers and mountains to cross.’

‘Yes, I wanted difficulties,’ I admitted, ‘but that is nothing to the way I want you.’

‘I’m here and waiting and wanting too,’ said she. ‘Would you like to dodge obstacles, Nigel, and take me without a fight?’

I hesitated — uncertain.

‘But that would mean chucking up my work, everything.’

‘Except me.’

‘Acknowledging defeat.’

‘I might be able to heal a wounded pride.’

‘Philida, do you honestly suggest this?’

‘I’m asking.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘You’d hate me for it. I’d hate myself for it. That isn’t your way or mine.’

Her hand closed more tightly on my arm.

‘Of course it isn’t our way.’

‘Then, damn the obstacles,’ said I, ‘we’ll carry on, Philida, up to the last line of defences.’

‘Which is?’

‘Your father’s consent to our marriage.’

She stopped in the middle of a step so that the couple behind us collided with my back, and reversed out of the tangle with over-shoulder apologies.

‘You’ve committed yourself now, Nigel,’ said Philida, ‘for we must always take each other at our word. It’s too late to withdraw.’

‘I shan’t withdraw,’ I said.

The music stopped, and Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter glided across to where we were standing.

'As ours is the next dance, Mr. Praed,' she said, 'let us all spend the interval together, then there will be no difficulty in finding each other.'

10

MRS. NUÑEZ-HUNTER had reserved a couch for her special use, by the simple process of strewing it with her belongings. Here I was led like a lamb to the slaughter. I had no curiosity as to what she wished to say to me, and for a long while she vapoured about who was who and who wasn't among the guests present. This kind of talk, being purely local, needed no help from me. It had been my good fortune that she had refused to dance. The band was playing a tango, and in respect to the memory of the first of her late husbands she danced the tango only with Spaniards.

'It is painful to witness the exhibition English persons make of themselves when they attempt it.'

I agreed heartily.

'How delightful for you to meet that charming American girl again! I forget for the moment her name, but then, American names are always impossible.'

'Nancy Vansiter,' said I.

'Oh, dear, to be sure, yes. You and she appear to be very great friends, Mr. Praed.'

'Because I know her name?' I inquired.

She touched my cheek with her single-feather fan.

'How discreet! Why, every one is talking about you two. I was telling dear Mrs. Chavington — her husband is Major Chavington — that your friend Lady Livesay had quite arranged a match between you. She agreed how suitable it would be.'

'As Mrs. Chavington is a stranger to Nancy and myself,' said I, 'no doubt her opinion is very valuable.'

‘Mrs. Chavington commands a great deal of opinion in Ponta Rica. Oh, yes. What she says is accepted.’

I said nothing.

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter suddenly turned on me with a direct question:

‘Why did you want to buy the palazzo?’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘I was acting on behalf of my firm.’

‘You were not aware, of course, that I wished to purchase it myself?’

‘Had I known I doubt if I could have allowed that to influence me,’ I replied.

She looked at me thoughtfully.

‘Mr. Praed, I make no pretence of possessing unlimited means; on the other hand, I have a great deal of influence out here.’

‘I am sure of that.’

‘When the property is offered a second time, I am hoping you will remember the fact.’

I ignored the latter half of the sentence and attacked the first.

‘Have we any reason to suppose it will be offered a second time, the vendor’s instructions withdrawing the lot were so explicit? Have you any reason to suppose he has changed his mind?’

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter bit the scarlet thread of her lip. ‘You are too exact,’ she complained, ‘but let me say, *if* the property is offered again I hope I may rely upon your chivalry in return for my friendship.’

‘My chivalry in such a matter, Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, would hardly be giving the vendor a square deal. A man who puts up property for auction expects it to go to the highest bidder.’

‘And my friendship, Mr. Praed?’ she asked pointedly.

'Surely you would not auction that?' said I.

'You are insolent.'

'Doesn't that prove how unlikely I am to win your friendship?'

She regarded me with pursed lips, then:

'On the contrary, friendship may be earned. I believe you have ambitions in the direction of Philida?'

'A moment ago it was Nancy Vansiter,' I said.

She ignored the interruption.

'In that matter my championship might make the difference between the success and failure of your suit.'

'But,' said I, 'there is nothing to stop Philida and me getting married to-morrow if we want to, and I could still buy the palazzo for my firm.'

'Your words may be repeated, Mr. Praed.'

She spoke sharply, venomously, and I am afraid my reply was in very bad taste.

'In speaking to you I have no doubt I am addressing Ponta Rica.'

'So you prefer to go your own way?'

'If you please.'

Some people were passing at the moment. Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter sprang to her feet and exclaimed sharply:

'I beg your pardon.'

Without another word she left me alone.

The people stopped in surprise and stared at me for explanation. I took a loose cigarette from my pocket and lit it.

As they passed on I heard one of the men say:

'Funny.'

I agreed with him. It was funny and rather inexplicable. The explanation came later.

This way: it was after the supper dance, which Philida and I spent as far from the supper-room as

possible. I had gone into the garden with one of the partners with whom Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter had involved me. She was a Brazilian lady, who in youth must have been a beauty. With advancing years she had thickened and become matronly, although the small face, high forehead, and black sloe-like eyes still retained some of the daintiness of girlhood.

She was, I learnt, the wife of a Portuguese wine-grower, whose vineyards were in a southern valley of the island. She had little enough to say, except to complain of the heat.

‘Bouf! so hot! We sit in the garden, eh?’

She knew the geography of the place better than I, and found in an appendix to one of the paths a rose bower with a seat in it. The bower was open at both ends and consisted of a wire arch, over which rose-briars had woven a tapestry of flowers and leaves.

It was flanked by a wild plantation of shrubs and palms. Before us a low moon hung in the sky.

‘Ah, this is better, cooler. No, I thank you, I will not smoke. I prefer to smell the roses and enjoy silence.’

So we sat, saying nothing and listening to the music and laughter which floated from the house. The music stopped, and presently there were voices in the garden and the crunch of footsteps on gravel. The Governor and Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter passed by to a seat a little distance away.

Then I heard Philida’s voice — then the voice of Leland Boas.

‘You are not wearing my flowers, Miss Philida. I had hoped for a single blossom pinned to the shoulder and hanging over the heart.’

‘No,’ she said.

‘I am hurt.’

'They were scarlet,' said Philida. 'I don't like flowers the colour of blood.'

'Blood is the colour of youth, Miss Philida. What better symbol of youth could you find than a scarlet flower over white?'

'No,' said Philida again. 'Once in the war I saw that. A nurse she was, with the front of her white dress dyed red.'

'How horrible!' he said in a strange, dry voice. 'Why do you — where was this?'

'In a hospital train near Arras.'

'Ah!' It was an expression of relief. 'One should forget such horrors. Put them away and shut down the lid of the box.'

'I think one should remember,' said Philida.

They were coming nearer. Already their shadows were darkening the meshed branches.

Then suddenly the woman at my side sprang to her feet with a sharp cry of:

'Abominable — disgraceful! Oh, to be so insulted!'

'Madame,' I said. 'What ——'

'Do not dare to address me.'

Four silhouettes had appeared as though by magic in the moonlit space before the bower — the Governor, Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, Philida, and Boas. The Governor was first to speak. He was genuinely agitated with all the official's hatred of scandal.

'What's wrong?' he demanded.

The lady pointed at me with a quivering finger.

'This creature. Your Excellency, how can I speak?'

Mrs. Hunter leant forward and whispered in the Governor's ear. He brushed her aside testily.

'Mr. Praed. Explain, please. I don't understand.'

'I understand very well,' said I, for in the moonlight I had seen Boas's smile.

Then the lady began to protest again.

‘I, a person of repute, to be treated as if — as if ——’

‘Lower your voice, madame,’ said the Governor, ‘we don’t want people to hear. Mr. Praed, I must ask you for an explanation. Philida, go away.’

But Philida stayed.

‘The explanation will come from me,’ the lady insisted. ‘This — this animal induces me to walk with him in the garden, and then, and then — how can I proceed?’

‘I shouldn’t, if I were you,’ came in a low, sweet voice from the dark shrubbery behind us. ‘I’ve been smoking a cigarette back here in the shadow ever since Mr. Praed and this — this lady came into the bower.’

Nancy Vansiter moved into the centre of the group, the glowing tip of a cigarette lighting up her features from below.

‘I think, madam,’ she said bitingly, ‘you suffer from hallucinations. That being so, I’d get right back to that vineyard you were talking of and cool yourself with grapes.’

For one moment the Brazilian lady wavered. Then, with an hysterical gasp, she fled.

Philida moved from Boas to her father, who seemed doubtful what to say or do. He was muttering:

‘Disgraceful — inexplicable.’

‘Yes,’ I said, and my eyes challenged Boas in the moonlight.

‘A most uncomfortable experience, Praed,’ said he. ‘You have my sympathy.’

‘And you mine,’ I said, ‘in advance.’

Then from the Governor: ‘You shall receive an adequate apology, Praed.’

‘Don’t bother, Sir Francis,’ I replied. ‘I am not concerned about that.’

'And very wise, too,' Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter interposed. 'After all, it is only one woman's word against another's.'

The cigarette dropped from Nancy's lips as they parted into a smile of comprehension. She took up the challenge with head on one side.

'To be more accurate — two others.'

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter put out an arm.

'Come! Our guests will be wondering what has happened. Let us return to the house.'

Without doubt, Sir Francis was glad of an excuse to end the affair.

'I should like to see you to-morrow, Praed, at three o'clock,' he said.

'I shall be there.'

'Come and have tea with me afterwards,' said Philida.

'I shall.'

Sir Francis took her arm and drew her away.

'I am sure,' said Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, indicating Nancy and me with a gesture, 'these two people would like to be alone. My dear Leland, give me your arm.'

Nancy watched them go with a chuckle of delight.

'We spiked that gun,' she said. 'But my! Your friends are not clean fighters, Nigel Praed.'

I took her hand.

'You're a trump — a real American,' I said.

She looked at me critically.

'Are you going to take it sitting down?'

'Not altogether, Nancy. I fancy Mr. Boas won't be seen about very much for the next few days.'

She sighed.

'And I'm supposed to join that ship to-night. Who'd be a girl, anyway?'

II

As soon as possible I made my farewells. It was nearly two o'clock when I entered the hotel. The sound of heavy breathing behind a closed door told me Kenedy was asleep. I peeped in and saw him lying fully dressed upon the bed. For a moment I debated whether or not to wake him, but I decided against doing so. What I had planned was entirely my own affair. Slipping off my dress clothes, I put on a golf suit, a soft shirt, and a pair of brown brogues. Pumps and a boiled front are not the best fighting gear. I suppose it was force of habit made me put money in my pocket and the large leather cigar-case I usually carry.

The night porter showed some surprise at my change of apparel and that I was going out again at so late an hour.

The night was very still and full of stars. My footsteps echoed dismally as I walked along the deserted streets. The Villa Perugia, where Boas lived, was situated on the rising ground a little to the left of the old town. It was approached by a flight of steps from a narrow roadway, and stood in a sloping garden, very precisely stepped and ornamented with stone cupids bearing bowls of geraniums and fuchsias.

The villa itself was small and rococo with green shutters and elaborate bas-relief decorations beneath the eaves of a roof of glazed tiles.

There were no lights in the windows, which argued that Boas had not yet returned.

As I climbed the steps I heard the sound of a carriage approaching, and presently saw the flash of its sidelamps rounding the bend beneath me. I had made up my mind to make Leland Boas pay for the trick he had played me that night, but it was no part of my plan

that in this matter he should have the support of his friends. If he found me standing at his gate, he would call the driver, or whoever else might be in the vehicle, to come to his aid. I did not credit him with willingness to fight his own battles if he could get any one else to do it. This being so, I nipped through the gate and squatted down behind the low wall.

The carriage stopped, and I heard a murmur of voices and the chink of coins. Then Boas said:

‘Come up for a moment.’

I could see nothing, but I heard the swish of a woman’s skirts. They came to a halt within four feet of where I crouched.

‘Who could have foreseen?’ said the woman, and I recognized the voice of Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter. ‘It would have succeeded but for the accident of the girl being there.’

‘We can’t afford accidents of that kind. Prothero suspected something was up. It was unfortunate.’

I could hear Boas tapping his teeth with a fingernail.

‘We’ve slipped badly — things have gone wrong — we’ve lost ground.’

‘Very well, the man must be dealt with. It isn’t difficult.’

‘It’s a pity the American girl is going away. She might have been useful.’

‘I did all I could. Most people think there is something between them.’

‘Most people, perhaps, but what good is that if Philida ——’

‘My dear Leland! One thing at a time. It is absurd to confuse the issue with love affairs. In my opinion the effort you have made to assail Praed’s moral reputation is perfectly ridiculous.’

'I'm not asking your opinion. I go about things in my own way.'

'Your successes have not been very marked.'

'Have yours? If so I haven't noticed it. I'm beginning to think it is almost time we made use of those letters.'

'No,' came the sharp rejoinder. 'No. I know Francis — you don't. With an ordinary man the letters might be an inducement, but with him one can never be sure. If we hold a pistol to his head, it's more than likely he would invite us to pull the trigger.'

'Prothero! Not for a moment. He's too fond of his position. Likes the importance of it — the ceremony. A threat to publish those letters and he'd approve our scheme fast enough.'

'A fear of the threat is much more valuable than the threat itself. At base he is obstinately honest.'

'Haven't you abandoned hopes yet of a third husband?'

There was a pause. Then she said distinctly:

'What a cad you are, Leland! Yes.'

'Suppose I use them,' he returned nastily.

'I forbid it. It would ruin everything. I forbid absolutely. If you've lost your head to that extent you had best return them to me.'

'They are very well where they are.'

I heard her take a step forward.

'Oh, no, no. I'm not such a fool as to store them in a doll's-house like this.'

'Where are they?'

'Safely buried, my dear.'

'Then, remember my warning — they are not to be used.'

'We'll see. Go home now. We'll have a talk tomorrow.'

She seemed to hesitate, then:

'I told Francis that if that aërodrome business went through, the Government would certainly appoint a member of the Air Force as Governor of Ponta Rica.'

Leland Boas chuckled.

'That was smart,' he said. 'You have your uses. It's a pity about the American girl. She's gone back to the ship, I suppose?'

'No. The ship doesn't sail till six. She went to the Casino with Belini and some others.'

'Praed?' he asked.

'No, unfortunately.'

'Well, well.'

Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter went down the steps. The carriage drove away.

Leland Boas watched her go, then walked past me to the house and admitted himself with a latchkey. A minute after the lights in one of the downstairs rooms blazed up. I saw Boas cross to a centre table and mix himself a drink. He drank it, wiped his neck with a handkerchief, and came forward and opened the French window. Creeping softly up the path, I vaulted the veranda rail and was in the room.

'Praed!' he exclaimed with a quick step back and a hand fumbling at his hip pocket.

'No,' I said, and had him by the wrist.

The plated automatic described an arc of reflected moonlight and struck one of the stone cupids by the garden wall.

'I warn you!' he cried.

'Get your coat off, Boas,' said I. 'Your collar and anything else you like.'

'You're mad — must be.'

'Go on — put a jerk into it. Madmen don't like waiting.'

He fumbled at his collar, then:

‘No — no. I’m damned if I’ll fight a drunken rowdy.’

‘Then I’ll undress you, too.’

That settled it. He ripped away his collar, pulled off his coat, and flung it full in my face.

What followed wasn’t a scrap, it was a murder competition. As the coat smothered me I side-stepped and lashed out blindly with my right. It landed on something pulpy, which I took to be his stomach. As I cleared my eyes he kicked me on the knee-cap, which must have snapped like a saucer had he been wearing anything but dancing-shoes. Then we mixed it, fists and elbows and finger-nails. He got a grip on my ear and tried to tear it off. I stopped that with a short-arm rabbit punch in the nape of the neck. From the way his head went forward I thought I had snapped his spine. Somehow he wriggled clear, warded off a perfectly good left, and jabbed a double handful of straight fingers into my face. It’s still a mystery to me how, with ten chances in his favour, he missed my eyes. One lid got a nasty scratch, and in the blur that followed he made a head-on charge at the pit of my stomach. Luckily my left leg was planted solid, which gave me a chance to bring up my right thigh and bring down my right forearm with his face shut between the two. I didn’t get my forearm far enough back, I suppose, for it should have landed in the nape of his neck to settle the business properly. He bit his way out of the squeeze, a badly shaken man. Taking my chance, I passed him a beauty to the point of the chin. Back he went, his head striking a picture frame and smashing the glass to splinters. That was all — at least, I thought so. The centre table went over as he hit the floor. I took the drumming of his fists on the mat as a

signal of defeat. I didn't guess in time that he was beating an electric bell-push which projected through the pattern of the carpet. I heard a distant bell whiz and flung myself full length across him. After that it was all legs and throats and broken china until the lights went out — went out with smooth suddenness impossible to describe. I felt myself drift out of violent life into a black oblivion across whose heavens poured a cataract of stars.

12

WHEN I came to I was lying in the corner of a dark dungeon-like cellar. A faint light percolated through a grating in the ceiling.

It was fully ten minutes before I had pulled myself together sufficiently to realize how I came to be in my present situation. I remembered the fight and its sudden end, but after that my impressions were the vaguest. From the fact that there was neither bruise nor wound upon my head, it was evident I had been hit by a sand-bag. I believed there had been a consultation over me, after which I had been put into a vehicle which had brought me very silently to where I now was imprisoned. Yes, I was sure there had been a night ride, because memory, which records and retains certain impressions even in minutes of oblivion, told me I had been glad of night air. Probably I had been brought in a rickshaw.

It was little enough one could see through the grating in the ceiling, but I was looking up through a kind of well in which were a number of cusped windows with little twisted pillars at their sides. Above me was a square of blue sky. The pattern of the windows was familiar, and with a rather dizzy head I tried to remember where I had seen them before. There was a

queer smell which also seemed familiar, a smell composed of sweet-scented myrtle, orange blossom, garbage, and evil sanitation. The ceiling of the cellar was cambered and the floor was covered with old Moorish tiles.

The tiles gave me the clue I needed. I was in the cellars of the palazzo, and the smell was the unforgettable smell of the old town.

I think in a way I found satisfaction in establishing my position on the map. I made a trumpet of my hands and holloaed aloud. My cries echoed dismally about the old building, but there was no answer. I shouted again with the same result. Then I tried the doors, of which there were two. The first, which was massive and studded with iron, had been bolted on the outside. The second opened at a pressure, and I found myself in the first of a series of cellars similar to the one I had left. On a packing-case beside one of the walls was a pitcher of water, some bread, a piece of cold bacon, and a couple of candles. It was evident my captors did not intend to starve me. I fell to with an excellent appetite. While I ate I asked myself what the object was of shutting me up like this. If they had intended to do away with me, an assumption too absurd to be considered seriously, they could not have wished for a better chance than I had afforded overnight. On the face of it the whole affair looked like a piece of childish vindictiveness which sooner or later would react against themselves. Yet Leland Boas was a clever fellow, and I did not doubt that the others who composed his syndicate were clever too. It was highly improbable they would do anything to implicate themselves. I concluded, therefore, that there must be an underlying motive which my imagination failed to grasp.

I lit a cigar and one of the candles and began to take stock of my prison. In all there were five cellars leading one from the other by means of archways and low galleries. The walls were of quarried stone recessed here and there for the reception of wine bins. To judge by the number of hock bottles and straw wrappers which littered the floor, the cellars had not been touched since the time of the German occupation. Some one had told me that the palazzo had been used as the German military headquarters, since when no one had lived there. Colour was lent to this statement by a discovery of a rats' nest composed of decimated army forms and official correspondence. It struck me as odd that Germans, generally so thorough in the matter of destruction, should have left papers lying about. It was possible, under the sudden assault of British shell-fire, there had been no time to burn books and records. Apart from the rats' nest there were no papers of any kind, which argued that the rats had brought their building material from elsewhere. The point was of no importance, save in so far as it provided occupation for my mind; but to keep one's mind occupied in captivity is perhaps the hardest thing to do. Accordingly I began to rummage among the bottles and straw which littered the floor in an effort to discover from which direction the rats had come. My search revealed a circular flagstone about the size of an inspection trap for drains. In the centre was an iron ring. The flooring round the flagstone was worn and uneven, and in one place had been tunnelled into a hole large enough for the passage of a rat.

The candle flickered as I held it near the hole in evidence that there was something more than a mere pit beneath. In the hope I might have found an unofficial exit from my prison I seized the iron ring, and

with a muscle-breaking effort wrenched the flagstone clear of its bed. An uprush of foul-smelling air sent me reeling against the wall with a hand over my mouth. After a minute the stench abated, and once again I ventured near the mouth of the hole. My light revealed a narrow tunnel slanting downwards at an angle of about forty-five degrees. A rusty handrail was anchored to the masonry, upon which pale fungi and evil vegetation grew profusely. From far below came the oily cluck of water.

I stretched out a foot and kicked the handrail. It was firm enough.

‘Here goes,’ said I, and let myself down hand over hand. In the descent the candle which I held in my mouth went out, but as I needed both hands I did not attempt to relight it. I must have gone down fifty feet before my foot, feeling beneath me, touched something pulpy, which gave, and settled upon a hard core. Retaining my grip on the rail, I dug here and there with my toe until convinced that the substance was equal to my weight. Satisfied, I straightened up, relit the candle, and looked about me. I was in a kind of gallery about the height of a man. The roof was covered with little grey stalactites and creeping mosses. Along the centre of the floor ran a half-pipe gully in which trickled a thread of gummy water. The shelf upon which I had landed was carpeted with soft, furry matter, which proved, on inspection, to be a mass of papers reduced to pulp by time and moisture. Evidently it was from here the rats had secured the material for their nest. It was down this *oubliette* the official correspondence of the German headquarters had been flung at the advent of the British fleet. I ploughed a furrow through it with the toe of my shoe, and the stuff adhered to the leather like a cancerous growth.

Holding the candle above my head, I picked my way along the narrow shelf. In a dozen yards I came to a great iron grille with bars as thick as a man's wrist. Retracing my steps, I investigated in the other direction, but here, too, I was confronted by a similar obstacle. I do not know that I was very disappointed, for the reeking atmosphere of the tunnel was making me sick and faint, and I had no great liking for the idea of following it into the black unknown. By comparison the cellars above were more attractive. With this conviction I turned about and walked back to the mouth of the hole. I had gone but a little way when my foot struck a hard object, which rattled noisily along the stones and came to rest like a spun penny in the gully of water. Picking it up, I saw it was a circular tin similar to those used by Scotch confectioners for shortbread. It was, however, much heavier than that. The union between the lid and the base was protected by a strip of perished soap plaster. I was about to leave the thing where I had found it, when it occurred to me that the tin might contain a cinematograph film. I did not imagine that it was likely to have resisted the damp to which, for the last seven or eight years, it had been exposed, but, circumstances having denied me the solace of companionship or of literature, it was folly to throw away even the meagre possibility of entertainment afforded by investigating the contents of the tin. Accordingly I buttoned it in the breast of my jacket before making the ascent from the tunnel. Coming down the ramp proved to have been much easier than climbing up. Slippery fungi made the going treacherous. For a long while I slithered about without making headway. I gave up the attempt after three or four unsuccessful efforts, and, pulling off my shoes, tried again in socks, monkey fashion, gripping at the uneven

stones with my toes. The smooth flowers of decay sundering oozily beneath my feet felt very vile. I had a nasty sense of walking over the fingers of dead men. The cellar seemed to recede as I advanced towards it, groping upward a few inches at a time. A grotesque horror filled my mind that my captors had come in during my absence and replaced the flagstone. It was the sort of boggy a child might have feared. However, I reached the top at last, and to soothe my nerves relit the butt of my last cigar. Strange to say, I had not thought of the time until this moment. Looking at my watch I saw it was two o'clock. The chances of keeping my appointment with Sir Francis Prothero were remote. I wondered what he would think when I failed to present myself. I could only hope that my absence would excite an inquiry. Philida's suspicions would be aroused. She would not rest until something had been done to disclose what had become of me. And there was Kenedy.

Carrying the tin containing the film, I returned to the first cellar.

Lying on the floor was a folded copy of the *Ponta Rica* newspaper of even date.

It must have been dropped through the grating from above, for it was not there when I left the cellar.

I picked it up and saw my own name.

'These Energetic English' was the caption. Then:

Mr. Nigel Praed, the engineer who is visiting *Ponta Rica* as a representative of a firm of English contractors, is a very energetic man indeed. After dancing nearly all night at Government House, he started off on foot before dawn to prospect our mountain ranges. Mr. Praed told our reporter, who met him on the outskirts of the town, that he may be away several days. He intends to scale the northern slopes of Amontado, and will attempt to reach the Old Rest House, which, owing to its inaccessibility since the landslide of 1913,

has been in disuse. Mr. Praed, who is an experienced climber, scouted the dangers of his expedition.

‘I enjoy rough going,’ he said, with a laugh. ‘In modern life there is altogether too little of it.’

He assured our reporter that he carried no other provisions but bar chocolate.

So this was the explanation offered for my disappearance. It presented a certain plausibility and gift for invention. It was well known I had come to Ponta Rica to prospect, and what was more natural than a solitary tramp through the mountains? There was, however, a disquieting feature in the paragraph — my alleged ignoring of the dangers attendant on the excursion. A sinister suggestion lay behind the words — a threat which argued that I was not perhaps as safe as I had persuaded myself to believe. What if in a few days’ time my body should be found beneath a precipice on a mountain-side? Amontado had an evil reputation and ——

‘Oh, rubbish!’ I told myself. ‘Before a body can be found the owner of the body must be killed, and the owner of my body doesn’t mean to be killed. Rubbish!’

But I did not feel as secure as I had felt before. To induce a more cheerful frame of mind I opened the tin that contained the cinematograph film with a rusty nail from one of the packing-cases. Inside the lid was a discoloured label with the words in German: ‘Official War Film. Propaganda Series.’

There must have been about a thousand feet of film in the reel, but through the intrusion of damp most of it had stuck together in a compact gelatinous mass. By pushing my thumb through the centre of the reel, I managed to extract a strip sixty or seventy feet long which proved unspoilt and unspotted. In the poor light of the cellar it was hard to determine the subject-

matter from the tiny little images on the film. The first photograph was a blank wall. A few figures came to the wall, retreated, and left one of their number, apparently a woman, standing with her back against it. At this point the camera had taken a shot from another angle. A picture of soldiers with an officer in charge. The officer raised his arm and there was a regular movement among the soldiers. I had to reconstruct the movement by running my eye quickly from exposure to exposure. At this point the camera again changed its position and took in the whole scene — officer, soldiers, and the solitary woman in profile. And then the woman was lying awkwardly on the ground and the soldiers were marching away.

With an unpleasant shock I realized I had been looking at the film of an execution. To hold the thing in one's hands was like unlocking a door which hid beastly happenings of the past. Once in Germany I had seen an execution. The victim had been a man. That was bad enough, but this was a woman. It was fitting, somehow, that a record of this act should have survived all these years at the bottom of a foul sewer — a proper safe for the preservation of such unlovely memories.

Some one had loved that woman, perhaps, and she had been shot against a wall. She may have been a great patriot, and she died a dog's death. And those by whose order she had died had made a film of the event to be added to a propaganda series.

My old hatred of the Hun surged up anew at the brutal, callous vulgarity of it. Once again I looked at the first exposures and felt pride at the straightness and composure of that tiny figure that stood before the blank wall. I would have given a great deal to have seen her face, for I knew that I should find

perfect tranquillity and confidence written on it. I rolled up the strip and put it into my now empty cigar-case. Little I guessed the consequences of that act, and the part this strip of film would play in the drama that was before me.

13

THE sound of men's voices roused me from a sleep into which I had fallen. Sitting up sharply, I looked about me, expecting to find some one in the cellar. There was no one, and yet the voices were distinct and near. The sound was coming through the grating in the roof.

They were speaking in German, too, perfect German that could only have been spoken by natives of the Fatherland. And one of the speakers was Boas.

That fairly brought me to my feet, listening with straining ears to catch what he said. The second man seemed very excited. He was disputing the wisdom of something Boas had done.

'Better get them. He was asleep ten minutes ago. Foolish thing to leave them there.'

Then Boas: 'Not now — later. You are all nerves.'

'I think you're wrong.'

'My dear — where is the hurry? Her sense is admirable. She says the risk would be far too great. They must be used as a final resort.'

'Yes, but ——'

'Hush, not before ——'

Some one else was coming, and at his approach the talk stopped short. I heard footsteps moving away.

What I had overheard was clear evidence that something was hidden in these cellars which they wanted, but which Boas thought it unwise to fetch until after I had been removed. Evidently it was something of

importance to their scheme. But what? Not the film, of which they probably knew nothing — and not the empty hock bottles or the straw or the packing-cases or the rats' nest. Then what? Memory of Boas's words at the garden gate overnight flashed into my head.

'I wouldn't hide them in a doll's-house like this. Buried, my dear — safely buried.'

Prothero's letters to Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter. There were a hundred places between the cement courses of the walls where a packet of letters could be hidden.

But Boas had said 'buried,' and when a man quickly answers a question he may conceal part of the truth, but rarely the whole of it.

It was to the floor, therefore, I directed my search, and as the floor was tiled the task was easier than might otherwise have been the case. One could eliminate all the tiles which were firmly fixed and focus attention on those which were loose.

Alas! none such were to be found in the first, second, or third cellar. In the fourth I was luckier. I found a tile which shook to a tap of the thumb. With the aid of a couple of coins I prised it up. Beneath was a small, square cavity in which was an oilskin tobacco-pouch. Inside the pouch was a packet of letters, neatly tied with tape. In my interview with the Governor I had noticed his handwriting, which was thin and distinctive. A glance at the envelopes satisfied me that these letters were in the same character. I released the tape and made a fan of the letters. Five of the envelopes bore Indian postage stamps, the sixth a Maltese stamp. The envelopes, which were unsealed, bore a serial number in pencil. For a moment I debated whether or not to burn them one by one in the candle flame, but a better idea suggested itself. I took out the letters

and put them in my pocket, revisited the rats' nest, and, selecting the largest pieces of paper, inserted them in the envelopes, which I rearranged in their original sequence and restored to the pouch. This done, I put back the pouch in the cavity and replaced the tile.

The luck had turned. The odds were now a shade in my favour. I happened to have a loose envelope in one of my pockets into which I put the Governor's letters and sealed the flap. To avoid the risk of being searched I posted the packet down the back of my neck, where it stuck like a mustard plaster between my shoulder-blades.

The sound of a key turning and of shooting bolts sent me scuttling back to cellar number 1. The big door swung back and revealed two men. Their faces were half-covered with coloured handkerchiefs, and they wore peaked caps pulled down over the eyes. One of them carried a large-calibre revolver, which he promptly trained at my chest. The other held a tray containing a pot of tea, some bread, and an unopened tin of sardines. Observing that my attitude was not menacing, he advanced, set it down on the packing-case, and retreated towards his companion.

I said: 'Don't go. I've had a very dull day. Why not stop and talk?'

They made no reply, but the man with the pistol pointed tittered rather foolishly. I do not think he was a born gaoler.

'Come along, gentlemen,' I went on, 'don't leave all the talking to me. I am starved for a little company, and you seem very jolly fellows in spite of the fancy dress.'

The man with the tray shook his head and laid a finger to the part of the handkerchief that covered his mouth.

'Oh, I see,' said I. 'I wouldn't have you disobey orders. Is there anything to pay for this entertainment?'

And I took a fiver from my note-case. However strong their devotion to their employer might have been, it was clearly evident that they were not averse to a reward.

The man with the pistol took the fiver readily enough and, by way of return, gave me a packet of cigarettes, then with a nod to his companion began to close the door.

'Just a minute,' said I; 'if any time you gentlemen should have reason to be tired of your present employment let me know, and perhaps I can put you in the way of something better.'

The door shut and the bolt slid.

The steaming pot of tea, the bread and sardines looked very good, but I hesitated before attacking them. The morning repast that had been provided, although simple had been harmless, and I could not imagine any particular advantage being scored by drugging me. Nevertheless, I was reluctant to take anything for granted. My doubts were dispelled by the sight of half a dozen candles on the tray. If they meant to poison or drug me, it was hardly likely they would supply me with a source of illumination. At worst, the candles argued that I might expect to be detained for some long time.

Having satisfied myself on that point, I poured out a cup of tea and drank it gratefully. It was good China tea, and I set about opening the sardines in the hope they would prove equally palatable. But while fitting the small wire key to the flap on the top of the tin I experienced a peculiar sensation of fatigue. My hands failed to respond to the demands made upon

them. Their actions were wayward and ungoverned. They went this way and that like a baby's. Simultaneously there came over me a delicious feeling of being drawn up into the air by nothing. It was weird — wonderful! I had lost contact with the world and was rising to unbelievable heights and spaces. Up, up I rose until I seemed to swing over the top of a mighty curve. Then everything was reversed. The spaces dwindled to a close confinement. I was rising no longer, but falling with ever-gathering speed into a narrowing, funnel-like pit whose sides closed in on me like the jaws of a trap.

From very far away I heard my own voice cry out:
'Clever to have put candles on the tray.'

Then darkness shut over me and there was no sound but the slow patter of earth that dropped on the lid of my coffin.

14

'NIGEL PRAED — NIGEL PRAED. Oh, man, can't you bring yourself round?'

So earnest was the appeal that, even against an inclination to lapse into oblivion, I made an effort to revive myself. The best I could manage was a futile movement of the hands which got me nowhere.

'Come, now, that's fine,' said the voice. 'Half a minute.'

A deliciously cool trickle of water ran through my hair and down my spine. It awakened the deadened nerve centres and broke the spell of unconsciousness. Very painfully I opened my eyes. There was a candle in the room, and by its light I saw Nancy Vansiter. She was seated on a stool beside the rough couch upon which I lay. Before me an uncurtained window showed a square of star-mottled sky. The room, save for a

rough table, the couch, and the stool, was innocent of furniture. The air had about it the rare flavour of mountains. It was thin, crisp, electrical. For a long while I lay blinking stupidly before convincing myself I was really awake.

At last I struggled to an elbow and stared at Nancy.

'It is me. I'm real enough,' she said, 'and so are you.'

I asked for some water and she held the jug to my mouth. My throat burnt like a furnace and there was a throbbing at the back of my head that hurt damnably.

'You'll be all right in a minute,' she said.

'Yes,' I nodded, 'but what are you doing here?'

She shook her head hopelessly and replied:

'Do you think you could stand? Try it.'

It needed all my determination in addition to a good deal of help from Nancy to get me across the room.

As the door opened, a rush of wind blew into our faces. The fumes of the drug cleared from my head as though by magic.

'Look,' said Nancy. 'Does this mean anything to you?'

I followed the direction of her gesture and gasped.

We were on a shelf of rock high up on a mountain-side. Melting away beneath us were hills, pleated valleys, beyond all the half-circle of the Atlantic. Where land and sea met, a tiny pencil of light shone and vanished at regular intervals.

'That's the revolving harbour light,' said I.

'Yes, but where are we?'

Rising precipitously behind us a tall peak was silhouetted against the night sky.

'Wait a bit.'

I took a step forward, but Nancy checked me.

'Don't — the ground is all loose — cinders or some-

thing. It falls sheer. I've looked. There's no way down.'

'There must be; we got up.'

She pointed at the precipice.

'Down there on a rope — let down from above.'

With sudden suspicion I asked:

'How do you know?'

'It's the way I came — and the way you must have come, Nigel Praed. It's an easy climb up the peak on the far side.'

'Nancy, what are you here for?'

'I was hoping you'd elucidate that problem.'

'But you ought to be on board the Mariana.'

'So I ought.'

The moon was dipping into the sea. Something in the sight startled me. I had seen the moon set the night of the ball at Government House at about 1.30 A.M. This night it would be a little later. I judged it was about seven o'clock when the tea had been brought to me in the old palazzo. Surely it was impossible that I should have been conveyed all this distance in the few hours between then and now.

'What's the day of the week?' I asked.

'Thursday.'

'Then I've been drugged and insensible for thirty-odd hours.'

'You've been here since nine to-night,' she said. 'I heard them bring you in, but I was locked in the other room. If I hadn't gone wild and tried the handle after they'd gone, I might never have known you'd arrived.'

'Then when did you come?'

'There wasn't much coming about it. I was fetched in a sack like a bag of beans.'

'Are you serious?'

'I am.'

'Have you had anything to eat?'

'Chocolate and plenty of water.'

The word chocolate revived a sudden memory of the newspaper which had been dropped through the grating of my cell.

'I've got it,' I exclaimed. 'We're in the Rest House on the peak of Amontado.'

The effect of my words was startling. Nancy stood away from me with blazing eyes.

'So you do know,' she cried, 'and pretending not to was part of the game.'

'The game?' I repeated.

'Yes, Nigel Praed. I suppose being drugged was a fake, too, eh? A sympathy-getter.'

'What are you talking about, Nancy?'

'Don't call me Nancy again. If you wanted to keep this little trip so quiet, it's a pity you got talking to that newspaper reporter before starting out. I thought you were a white man and I thought you were in love with Philida Prothero. Looks to me you stand in a fair way to get pushed off that cliff, my friend.'

The charge was so entirely unexpected that I could find no words to refute it. Nancy Vansiter went on with unabated fury:

'This is the crudest piece of kidnapping ever heard of. What's the notion? Did you fancy I'd imagine I'd been snatched by brigands and that you were going to play Providence after pretending to be a prisoner yourself? Did you figure my intelligence was too mean to see through a plot like that? Nigel Praed, you're going to hear some things about yourself, and after that we'll see what the American Consul has to say about it.'

'Nancy,' I said, 'since the night of the ball at Gov-

ernment House I've been shut up in a cellar of the old palazzo. There I was drugged and brought here.'

'It sounds likely, doesn't it?' she retorted. 'Just the sort of thing that might happen.'

I said nothing, and in the silence that followed I think she regretted the bitterness of her tone. When next she spoke her words had lost their edge.

'Maybe I'm doing you an injustice, but if I wasn't brought here to your order, what am I here for, anyway?'

I rubbed my forehead hopelessly.

'I don't know. I don't even know why you are still on the island.'

'That part is simple — I changed my mind at the eleventh hour — sent down to the ship for a suit-case and engaged a room at the Esterella. I'd a hunch this place might prove interesting.' She threw up her head with a hard laugh. 'It certainly has.'

'Yes ——' I began. 'But how ——'

'Did this quandary arise? Out of the blue. I was taking a walk on the slopes back of the town. Some one told me it was the thing to do roundabout the sunset hour.' Once again she laughed. 'It isn't.'

'What happened?'

'Why, you know those rush-covered two-wheelers — kind o' dump-carts, from the vineyards?'

I nodded.

'One of those comes along, stops, and out jumps a couple of drug-store cowboys with a sack. You can't put up much of a show with a sack all round you. After that we drove for hours. Then I was transferred, sack and all, to the back of a mule. I'm going to say I got tired of breathing through hemp.'

'The swine!' said I. 'The utter swine!'

Nancy Vansiter made a despairing gesture.

'But what's at the back of it, Nigel Praed? What do they hope for, wrapping up an American citizen like a papoose and dropping her down a mountain-side?'

I said nothing.

'And what's the answer? You're a man of ideas.'

'Nancy,' I said, 'you remember the affair at Government House in which you took part?'

'That Brazilian woman?'

'Yes.'

'It's not so long ago.'

'Thanks to you the plot went wrong.'

'I see a streak of light,' said Nancy slowly. 'You think this may be a second shot at the same mark?'

'They have no reason to be grateful to you, Nancy.'

'You think we're going to be rescued. Found here together, Nigel Praed, like a pair of runaways?'

Her solution was too probable to deny.

She was silent a moment, thoughtfully biting her lower lip, and every now and then looking at me with a queer, new awkwardness. At last:

'That man Boas — he's fond of Philida?'

I jerked my head in assent.

'And this is a jealousy stunt to put you wrong with her?'

'Among other things.'

'He's an elaborate thinker, that man — but not over-strong on psychology. Philida's not the sort to believe ——'

'No,' said I. 'But ——'

'Just so — others would. Especially as ——'

'Well?'

'There was talk back there at Ponta Rica. A woman asked me when we were announcing our engagement.'

'Oh, yes,' I said, 'they are thorough enough.'

A surge of bitterness swept over me.'

'I could have killed that man two nights ago. I had my hands round his throat. I wish to God I'd done it. Nancy, I'll never forgive myself getting you into this mess.'

'Oh, shucks!' said she. 'Where's your responsibility?'

My responsibility was plain enough — dazzlingly plain. In a very short time Nancy and I would be found together in this place from which there was no escape. And we should tell a story to our rescuers so fantastic and improbable that not one in a thousand would believe it. And after that tongues would wag cheerfully to the tune of a new scandal. I could imagine Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter dealing with that part of the business. Nancy's reputation would be a tattered thing when she had finished handling it.

'My dear, she came over from the Continent especially to be with him. It's so obvious. Oh, dear, yes. And they were together at Hardelet.'

Nor would it end there. The mud they threw would stick. By leaving the island Nancy would not escape it. It would follow her round — and precede her wherever she might go. Cynics declare that since the War reputations are unfashionable. A few nights before I had seen Nancy Vansiter nod at the stars, and I knew very well that there were stars in the clean open spaces of her mind.

She was sitting now with her face in cupped hands, a serious expression on her mouth and her brows down. Becoming aware that I was watching her, she forced a laugh and spontaneously put a hand into one of mine.

'Don't look so glum,' she pleaded. 'The blame's mine. I ought to have caught the ship. They've got

us where they want us, but the hand isn't played out yet. And, anyway, what's it matter?'

She was facing it with the bravery I knew she possessed, but underneath the disregarding air was a clear enough picture of what to expect.

'Look here, Nancy ——' I began.

But with a gesture almost angry she stopped me.

'Say nothing, please. I know quite well what's at the back of your mind and I want it to stay there. There's no reason to worry about me. You've plenty to do looking after the girl you're in love with, without wearing knight's armour on my account.'

'You don't understand,' I said. 'These people will work this business to the very utmost.'

'I think I understand well enough,' she answered in a voice that was warm as sunshine. 'And I like you for what you were thinking a minute back. It's that grand old rescue-from-the-tower spirit we women love and laugh at. You belong to the rescue class, Nigel Praed, and I wouldn't have you different. But, don't you see, old man, you can't have a fight of this size without casualties?'

'Nancy,' I said, 'I suppose you're the best sportsman that ever breathed mountain air, but ——'

'But the rest is understood,' she interrupted. 'Good-night.' With a wave of the hand she left me and went into the house.

15

WITH the setting of the moon the night had been very dark. I waited until dawn before prospecting the curved shelf of rock upon which we had been lowered. In length it was perhaps a hundred yards — in width at most twenty. Above towered the peak of Amon-tado, sheer, save where here and there the rock had

split into seams filled with dusty pumice which crumbled in the hand like flour. It was down the largest of these that Nancy and I had been lowered. A broken rope dangled about twenty feet above my head, which doubtless had been put there on instructions from Boas. He had an affection for artistic details. It was obvious our descent would have to be explained. If one could reach that rope a way of escape was open, but the soft, drifting pumice provided no sort of foothold. It fell and fell and fell. After a dozen efforts I gave up trying and turned my attention to the cliff below — walking along the edge from one end to the other and inspecting every inch of the way. The eastern extremity offered a fine view of the mountain sloping into a valley that was still veiled in mists. A rough track swept up from the valley and vanished out of sight behind the overhang of the cliff. From this point there was no way of escape. The most experienced climber could have made nothing of that rock-face either up or down. I returned to the western extremity. Here the ground was crumbly and weak, and, not caring to trust my standing weight, I lay down and peered over the edge. There was a fall of about twelve feet, then a tilt outward at an acute angle against the main face of the precipice. The tilt was not more than a few feet wide and in some places even less. Viewed from above it looked like a diagonal line chalked upon a wall. The surface appeared to consist of finely ground pumice and mountain dust smoothed by winds. For perhaps three hundred feet it sloped, fanning out at the base like sand in an hourglass, upon a barren slant of rock that was once a lava stream. Presumably this odd formation had been caused by a cleavage in the rock, when the shelf upon which the Rest House stood had broken away from the mountain-side as the result of a

volcanic upheaval. Regarded as a possible avenue of escape, one could hardly conceive any less calculated to encourage hopes of success. Assuming one managed to reach the head of the slide, the chances were a hundred to one against keeping a centre line and avoiding being shot over the edge. Nor was that the only danger. So acute was the angle that a heavy body attempting to toboggan down it would incur such terrific friction as surely to set himself on fire. I once knew a man whose elbows were burnt to the bone on an ice slip.

My discovery was interesting but unpromising — and in anything but a desperate predicament I would not have given it a second thought. Looking back, I do not for a moment believe I reasoned out clearly the line of action I meant to take. I was confronted by a choice of two evils and I had to remember that the result of that choice did not affect me alone. Nancy Vansiter had become involved in a trouble that was not of her making and with magnificent pluck had determined to meet it. She meant to grin and be a martyr. She had made up her mind about that and gone to sleep. That was her point of view, and doubtless she was satisfied with it because in their unshakable deliberations in regard to personal codes and ethics there is no sacrifice a woman will not gladly make.

But what she had failed to realize were the lengths to which a man will go to extricate himself from accepting sacrifices of such magnitude. In cold analysis I believe I funked the situation with a whole-hearted lack of moral courage that blinded me for the while to a sense of physical danger. Obstinacy, too, may have had something to do with it, for, quite apart from the consequences to Nancy, I could not endure the thought of being worsted in the game — trapped and

exposed to ridicule. At any cost I had to have a shot at getting my own back.

My mind was made up. Backing away from the edge, I returned to the Rest House and tiptoed inside.

Nancy was still asleep — her head on a crooked arm, a serious smile on her bright young mouth. I had never seen a fresher, cleaner face. It told a tale of a healthy body and a healthy mind — clean all through. A queer superstition put the thought in my head that to touch her as she lay sleeping would be an amulet against danger. Stooping, I kissed a stray curl that stranded across her forehead, then moved silently into the adjoining room.

Picking up a packing-case which I had seen there, I carried it as far away from the house as possible. With a little effort I wrenched apart the short planks from which it was made. Two of these I tied to my forearms with strips torn from a large silk handkerchief — two more to the soles of my shoes with projecting ends beyond the toes to act as brakes. I used my laces to make them fast. Another couple I fastened over my thighs as a protection for the knees. The lid of the box, which was about three feet long, I preserved in its original form. It was a stout lid strengthened with battens and possessing two rope handles about twenty inches apart.

It was the best I could hope to achieve with the materials at my disposal. Nothing now remained but to make the attempt. Before doing so I moved along the shelf toward the eastern extremity. I moved cautiously, and glad I am I had the foresight to do so. The Rest House and the western end of the shelf were out of sight from the mountain slope, but the eastern end was in full view. Coming up the slope, not more than a mile away, was a party of men and mules. At the distance it was hard to identify any one with certainty,

but from the way the foremost figure walked I was sure it was Kenedy. Behind him was another, whom I took to be Hugh Chalice. Boas I could not see, but I had not expected him to be of the company. He was too inspired for that. .

For another minute I watched them, then, keeping well out of sight, returned to the Rest House.

‘Nancy,’ I called. ‘Nancy, they’re coming.’

She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and exclaimed:

‘Gee! I’m still here! Yes — what’s that? Who’s coming?’

‘That rescue party.’

I saw her lip quiver ever such a little.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s no more than we expected.’ She looked at me and her forehead creased into puzzled lines. ‘What have you dressed yourself up like a timber-yard for?’

‘Nancy,’ I said, speaking fast and as if it were a tremendous joke, ‘those friends of ours are going to draw a blank. I’ve found a way out of this difficulty.’

‘Where?’ she demanded. ‘There isn’t one.’

‘There is, and I’ll show it to you in a minute. I want you to stay behind and meet the rescuers with gratitude and fortitude. I’ll leave you to manage a yarn as to how you got here with this suggestion — I don’t think the truth would be believed.’

‘And if they ask for you?’

‘Look blank.’

‘That part’s simple — but what’s this bunk about a quick way out?’

‘Come along and I’ll show you.’

Her hand fastened on my arm.

‘Nigel Praed,’ she said, ‘if you’re figuring on a piece of mad altruism ——’

‘Nothing of the kind. It’s easy as pie ——’

'I'm not trusting you,' she warned me; 'but lead on.'

I pointed to the left.

'As far as you can go.'

She led the way suspiciously.

'Down on your hands and knees! Crawl and look over.'

She obeyed and wormed her way to the edge. She was not more than a fifth of a second grasping what I meant to do.

'No,' she cried sharply. 'No.'

But she was too late. Keeping close to the cliff face, I jumped and landed with a soft thud on the loose, powdery soil. There was a fraction of grace before my feet began to slip — an infinitesimal speck of time, but long enough for me to throw my weight forward and tip, chest downward, on the box lid.

I doubt if one man in a thousand will believe the statement that, during that crazy adventure, I never felt a particle of fear. I had been frightened enough before I took the leap, but once started, all dread was gone. Indeed, I believe I felt more intensely alive then than ever before. The going was terrifically faster than I had imagined it would be, mad seconds surcharged and packed with impressions of lightning-quick actions. In the foreground of my mind was a determination to dig in with my left toe and keep myself from shooting into the void that yawned to the right. Nancy told me afterward that three times I was half over the edge, but each time contrived to regain the centre of the track. For my own part I was too occupied and exhilarated to have anything but the vaguest knowledge of what was happening to me. The surface of the slide was cambered, which increased the risk of a fall by fifty per cent. The brakes I had fitted to my shoes only lasted a second or two. As the laces

which held them snapped, I felt myself plunge downward like a shot from a gun. The ground rushed up to meet me so fast that my eyes lost all ability to judge the distance. I saw a little rock swell as though by magic to the size of a cottage. It was right in my path and would inevitably break me into pieces. Yet before full apprehension of the danger was upon me I had acted, rolling my body sideways, missing it by half a foot and spinning over and over, this way, that way, somersaulting and at last coming to rest, blinded with dust, the breath knocked out of my body, on a ramp of loose earth at the foot of the slide.

I do not know how long I lay there gasping for that first inspiration of air so agonizing to obtain. I felt I must suffocate if the vacuum in my lungs would not give way. In jerks and spasms breath came back to me, and I sat up. I was not a moment too soon, for as I did so I saw a very small Nancy rise to her feet and stand, rocking like a diver, on the crumbling edge of the precipice.

My first breath bellowsd out of me with a cry of:
'Get back — back.'

She heard me and sat down very suddenly, like a mechanical doll, and a hundredweight of loose earth and rubble broke away beneath her feet like a puff of smoke.

It was a bad moment, and sweat was pouring down my face as I struggled to a kneeling position and straightened up. I had come out of the adventure surprisingly well. The wooden skids had fulfilled their task nobly. Not a bone was broken. From head to foot I was in working order. A little shaken, perhaps — a shade the worse for wear, but otherwise good for going. My clothes had suffered a bit and the toes of my shoes had almost vanished, but that, so far as I could tell, was the full inventory of my misfortunes.

With a sense of rather amazed gratitude, I lifted an arm and waved to Nancy. She did not return the greeting. Her hands were pressed over her eyes, and even at the distance I could see she was crying. I suppose it was reaction after a trying experience, but I wondered a little that she took it that way.

Obviously this was not the moment to work out feminine complexes. My job was to get off the landscape as quickly as possible. I felt a bit queer as I stumbled down the rough hillside to seek the shelter of a forest of gnarled cork trees and pines that clothed the lower slope. Here, safe from observation, I sat down and lit one of the cigarettes given me by my jailers two days before. I had figured out a clear plan of action, but before leaving the vicinity I meant to be sure that Nancy was all right.

She had moved from the precipice and was standing by the door of the Rest House, her head leaning against a panel. She stayed so without movement until suddenly aroused by a faint halloo. Looking up, I saw the figures of the rescuers sharp against the pale blue of the morning sky. There were half a dozen figures, but only three came down the seam on a rope. Kenedy, Hugh Chalice, and another I recognized instantly as the man Levis who had bid against me at the auction. Nancy ran to meet them, and I saw her making gestures of explanation. Kenedy put a question and Nancy shook her head. Kenedy's attitude was vividly expressive of disappointment. After that Levis detached himself from the group, and, moving toward the house, looked through both windows. Not satisfied, he went inside and came out a minute or two later. He was clearly in great perplexity of mind. He wandered here and there casting about for a place in which a man might be concealed.

His head for heights was none too good; the nervous way he peered over the cliff edge was comic. Evidently he assumed I must have fallen or jumped over, and for a long while he was occupied with the cheerful task of looking for my dead body on the rocks below. Never was a search more thorough. From east to west he crawled, minutely examining every inch of the ground. At the spot from which I had made my jump to the vertical slide he rose, dusted his knees, and shook his head. I was not altogether surprised that he suspected nothing in that direction. A man who is subject to vertigo rarely possesses mountain sense and fails to see the practicability of even simple climbs.

Despairing of finding a solution to the mystery, he returned to the group, puzzled and crestfallen.

I waited until I had seen Nancy hoisted up on the rope, then, under shelter of the trees, struck south in the direction of Ponta Rica.

16

I MAY claim to possess a freakish memory for maps. Although I had never visited this part of the island I had spent many hours studying a large ordnance survey of Ponta Rica, and its features were almost as familiar to me as the fingers on my hands.

The point I aimed to reach was a junction between a road which skirted the northern slopes of Amontado and a bridle path which ran beneath the precipitous southern side of the mountain.

It was along the north road the rescue party had come and in due course would return. The cut I had taken would bring me to a point in that road a great deal sooner than they could hope to reach it. I argued that in all probability they would have left cars or

horses at the spot whence they had started to climb the mountain, but even so the distance they would have to travel was very much longer than the route I had taken.

I had no intention of waiting for them at the union between the road and the valley. I wanted to reach there first, then push on down the steep, rocky ravine through which the road ran, to a spot where it was traversed by a valley from the east. Here I proposed to conceal myself until they came into view and then casually walk down to meet them.

There was grave doubt as to whether I should reach the eastern valley in time, but the plan was sound enough to merit a substantial effort being made. If it succeeded, even the most suspicious would find it hard to believe I had spent the night on Amontado. It would finally clear away any impression that Nancy and I had been together.

With a chuckle of delight I remembered the paragraph that had been published about me in the newspaper. In the circumstances it looked like being of greater service than harm. I had gone prospecting and had chosen as my ground the rough, uninhabited eastern area of the island where a man might wander for weeks and meet no one. Boas had made me a gift of an alibi.

Full of enthusiasm, I broke into a double.

For the first mile or so the ground was uneven and harsh with stones, but presently I came to green slopes starred with periwinkles and a purple horn-shaped flower with prickly leaves, the name of which I do not know. This was grazing land. Mountain goats fled at my approach, and grave-eyed cattle with slow swinging jaws raised their heads and watched me go by.

Beyond were the vineyards protected from the winds by rush palisades, and lines of tall cypresses looking

like toy trees stolen from a child's nursery. For a mile and a half I ran under the lee of the palisades, before breaking through into the terraced vineyards on the other side. Here progress was hindered by the loose, ploughed soil, the espaliers of the vines, and sharp little slopes from terrace to terrace. It was like going down a gigantic flight of steps with too short a pair of legs. I had, moreover, to keep a sharp lookout for early workers. Luck favoured me and I reached the grassy ride at the foot of the valley without meeting a soul. Beside the path was a bubbling stream, and I was glad enough to take a long draught of water and bathe my face and hands. I must have presented an awful spectacle. There was three days' growth on my chin and my hair hadn't seen a comb since the night of the ball at the Government House.

This was the first time I had realized I was unshaved, and the thought depressed me beyond expression. An unshaved man is of all objects the most suspicious. The holes in my clothes might pass unnoticed since they were mostly under the back of my coat, but the musical-box effect would inevitably destroy the impression I desired to create in the minds of the rescue party of an unruffled individual casually meeting a few friends on a country road. There was no time, however, to waste in lament. Getting to my feet, I started off at a steady run. The grassy ride twisted this way and that with the curve of the valley. I had covered perhaps a mile when I met a horse. He was an amiable horse who appeared glad to see me and was not in the least offended when I swung myself to his back and urged him along at a canter. I should have realized that where there is a horse there is a house. Rounding the next bend, I came upon a typical peasant's cottage. The slopes to left and right were too steep to attempt

to skirt round it; moreover, I was abreast of the cottage as I turned the corner.

The only alternative was to gallop past and hope to escape observation. But in this luck was against me. The horse, willing enough up to this point, stopped abruptly before the open door and whinnied. My efforts to induce him to proceed were without avail. He had gone as far as he meant to go and neither exhortations nor the drumming of heels shook his resolve.

It struck me as odd that no one came out to see what all the row was about. A few fowls ran in and out of the open door, but of human beings there were none. Cautiously I approached and peeped through the window-pane. The fowls clucked and scampered, but otherwise the cottage was deserted.

Is the law very severe, I wonder, upon a man who enters the house of a stranger and has a shave at his expense? The pain I suffered in the absence of soap wherewith to soften my beard and in the use of a razor that was blunt as a spade would perhaps have been regarded as penalty enough. Agonizing though it was, I lost no time over the business and went my way rejoicing.

As an act of grace I left a florin beneath the cracked mirror which no doubt created in the mind of the cottager a firm belief in miracles.

Twenty minutes later I reached the fork of the roads. I had made good time, having covered six miles in something under an hour and a quarter. That I was ahead of the rescue party I had no doubt, but there was still a fair stretch of country before me, and if they were in cars I could not afford to linger.

I did not waste much time over the last two miles. I went through that ravine at a terrific pelt. As it turned out, I might have spared myself the effort, for I reached

my objective with half an hour to spare before the first car, with Hugh Chalice at the wheel and Nancy at his side, ran out into the open space where the valleys met.

Nancy's face, when I stepped into the road, was the most complete register of amazement I have ever seen. Luckily Chalice was looking at me or he must have suspected something. For a moment I was afraid she would cry out or go off into hysterics, but she got a grip on herself in time.

'Hullo, Praed,' exclaimed Chalice. 'Where on earth did you spring from?'

I nodded over my shoulder.

'Down this valley from the east. Pretty tough country, too.' Then, turning to Nancy: 'You are up and about bright and early. I thought you were on your way back to England.'

She gave a catchy little laugh.

'I've been having adventures.'

Hugh Chalice chipped in.

'A nice scare she's given us. Whole island's been in an uproar.'

'How's that?'

He was launching into a recital of Nancy's disappearance when the other cars rolled up. Out of the first sprang Kenedy, his emotion at high tide.

'Shut up,' I said. 'I want to hear what has been happening to Miss Vansiter.' Under the discreet shelter of the car I planted a kick on his shin.

Hugh Chalice had a gift for narration and told his story with dramatic effect.

'Had a fancy to do a bit of mountaineering, she'll tell you — gets night-bound, then slithers down one of those loose seams where the steps used to be before the landslide in 'thirteen. How she didn't break her neck I don't know.' He threw up his hands. 'Lord! these Americans!'

'But where was this?' I demanded.

'Amontado. We hauled her off a shelf halfway down the side of a precipice.'

'Oh, good land!' said Nancy, 'quit all this drama. Any one'd think I'd died three deaths.'

'It beats me to know what she did it for — alone without a guide.'

'How did you guess where to look for her?' I asked.

'A worker in one of the vineyards reported seeing figures by the old Rest House.'

'Figures!' I repeated.

Hugh Chalice laughed.

'He must have been mistaken, for once on that shelf you were fixed for life or until somebody hauled you off.'

'The peasant was very sure there were two people — and one was a man.'

The speaker was the dapper Jew, Mr. Levis, of the auction at the old Palazzo.

'Well, where is he?' I asked sweetly.

'We *found* no one but this lady.'

Hugh Chalice leant over the side of the car and scowled.

'Strikes me,' he said, 'you're behaving rather like an ass, Mister what-is-it Levis. Miss Vansiter has told us that she went to the mountain alone.'

'Oh, yes, Mr. Chalice, she told us that.'

The tone was fawning but insolent.

I swung round sharply.

'Have you any reason to think otherwise?'

He hesitated.

'What?' I rapped out the word sharp as a pistol shot.

'No, Mr. Praed, none at all.'

The tone was conciliatory.

'Then what are you talking about?'

'Nothing. I only thought it was queer, the peasant making a mistake like that.'

'Perhaps if he wasn't subject to making mistakes like that he wouldn't still be a peasant,' I said.

'Yes, that's very practical, Mr. Praed.'

'Glad you think so. Perhaps you can find me a seat in your car?'

'Delighted, Mr. Praed.'

I took my place beside him in the last car.

The procession moved on. A windscreen protected us from being overheard by the driver. We had driven some way before Levis ventured a remark.

'It was good fortune meeting you like this, Mr. Praed. There was quite a feeling of alarm at Ponta Rica that you too were missing.'

'Is that so?'

'Oh, quite a feeling.'

'I hardly see why,' I replied. 'I told the newspaper reporter I might be away for some days.'

He looked at me with a faint smile.

'Mr. Praed,' he said, 'would it surprise you to learn that I was that newspaper reporter?'

'Not at all,' said I. 'We met on the outskirts of the town after the ball at Government House.'

'That meeting never took place, Mr. Praed.'

'Didn't it?' I said. 'That's very strange since you wrote saying it did take place and I recall the circumstances perfectly.'

Levis pursed his thick red lips, then relaxed them into a smile.

'You certainly have some nerve, Mr. Praed, but it occurs to me that even in spite of our alleged meeting there may be some doubts as to your motives in leaving town. The fact that you appeared on the roadside

without provisions of any kind is enough to excite suspicion.'

'Oh, but you forget,' I returned, 'that I carry only chocolate on these expeditions. I would give you a piece if I hadn't finished the last of it this morning.'

He flushed angrily and was silent for a moment, nibbling a finger-nail and every now and again shooting glances in my direction. Suddenly he blossomed into unexpected frankness.

'How did you get away from that Rest House? It was impossible — couldn't be done.'

'Doesn't that prove I was never there?'

'But you were there. You went there in my company.'

'I can hardly imagine you would want to brag about that. It wouldn't be very effective, Levis, to say this bad fellow didn't actually abduct the girl, but we put him in such a position that people would think he had. I doubt if any one would blame me for that.'

'You're very smart, Mr. Praed, and very sure of yourself. I suppose next you'll go to Government House and tell them the truth of the whole business.'

'I might,' I replied, 'if I hadn't found a better way of putting a York hitch on your crowd.'

'What way?'

It was my turn to smile.

'That's not in the contract, but you might drop a hint to our friend Boas not to leave tobacco-pouches lying about.'

'Tobacco-pouches?'

'He'll understand.'

The ingrained Oriental suspicion of the man's nature was roused.

'But suppose he doesn't understand?'

'It will simply be a matter of time before he does.'

'Time,' he repeated anxiously. 'What sort of Time?'

'Ah!' said I. 'Ah!' and crossed my wrists as though they were in chains.

Levis shivered.

'This is bluff,' he said. 'Bluff! You'll have a job to scare us, Mr. Praed. We don't run at a cry of wolf.'

'No, but we crawl at the edge of a cliff, eh, Levis?'

He started violently.

'Then you were there — you were?'

I nodded. 'And I wonder if you've any notion what a whelp you looked!'

His breath came short between shut teeth.

'All right,' he said. 'All right. We missed you this time, but don't flatter yourself you can get away with it. We haven't done with you yet.'

'You can be very sure of that,' I promised, and gripping him by the back of the neck, pushed his head down between his knees. 'There are your feet, Levis, see 'em down there? — feet Heaven gave you to stand on. Look at 'em and lick 'em, you poor little man who goes on all fours.' Moving his head from side to side, I blackened his nose against the toes of his boots.

'Let me go!' he squealed. 'I can't breathe.'

I held him there.

'Go on, crawler, lick 'em. It's cleaner work than your dirty tongue has a right to expect. You were hoping to blacken a girl's good name, eh? but you've been cheated of the chance. You can taste a bit of blacking on your own account.'

His face was smeared from brow to chin and he was gasping for breath when I jerked him back to a sitting position. He cowered from me like a beaten dog. Never in any man's face had I seen such impotent fury and hatred.

'My God,' he gasped, 'if I had a knife I'd cut your eyes out for that!'

'A knife!' I laughed. 'It's a banjo you want, my friend.'

17

THE town clocks were striking nine when our procession of cars came down the hill into Ponta Rica. Hugh Chalice dropped Nancy at the Esterella and waved me to join him in the two-seater.

'I'll run you round to the Saint George, Praed,' he said. 'I wanted a word with you, if possible.'

Somehow he seemed at a loss how to begin.

'It's like this, old chap. You're in bad at Government House, to borrow a phrase from our little American friend.'

'Well, that's nothing new.'

'The old man's pretty wild at your failing to keep that appointment.'

'It couldn't be helped.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'That's your pigeon, and I dare say you'd a perfectly good reason for going off into the hills at a moment's notice.'

'I had to go.'

'Still, it would have been tactful to send up a note.'

'Chalice,' I asked, 'is this a tick-off?'

'Course not, only — only I was rather favouring your show and it was a disappointment to see you let yourself down — especially as ——' He hesitated.

'Well?'

'They're a rotten crowd out here — real scum — if they can put a wrong interpretation on an action they'll do it. Thank God, we shall be able to squash that lying talk, anyhow.'

'What talk?'

He flushed a bit.

'Miss Vansiter disappearing at the same time.'

'So that's what they've been saying?'

'Lot of swine. She's one of the best little sports I've met in years.'

'I'll back that estimate. Is there anything else?'

He looked dubious.

'I'm not in the old man's confidence, but I can usually tell which way the wind's blowing. The barometer shows you're in for a gale. I hate saying this, Praed, but I don't think you've an earthly of putting your scheme through. There's a devil of a lot of wire-pulling going on somewhere.' He broke off to ask: 'It's all rot, isn't it, about you skrimshanking in the war?'

'Hullo,' said I, 'where does that come from?'

'I heard Boas telling Miss Prothero you resigned your commission in the R.E.'s early in 'fifteen and never rejoined another unit. He hinted at scandal that had been hushed up — said that the King had no further use, etc.'

'Was she impressed?'

'Good Lord, no.'

'Were you?'

'No fear.'

'Then that's all right.'

'But it's up to you to put yourself square, old chap. There's another thing.'

'Let's have the lot.'

'Craven. Craven's one of the best fellows alive, and I'd take his estimate of a man as soon as any one's.'

'Well?'

'He's an idea you are not what you seem to be. He's frank as the day about it, because I had the thing out with him and told him it was all rot. But he just shook his head and stuck to his guns. I do wish you'd have a talk with him and try and clear it up.'

'Perhaps some day I'll do that,' I said. 'For the present, my hands are pretty full. You've been tremendously friendly, Chalice; in fact, you're the one man in this island who's shown me a vestige of decency. I needn't say I'm grateful, but I wonder sometimes why you bother.'

Hugh Chalice looked up awkwardly, and his eyes drifted out to sea.

'Tisn't surprising, old chap. Dare say you'll think me all kinds of an ass, but a fellow can't help being fond of a girl even though he knows he hasn't an earthly.'

'Philida?'

He nodded. 'Funny, ain't it?'

'It would be funnier if you weren't,' said I.

'Oh, that. I mean telling the chap she's fond of. You see, I don't aspire, Praed, but I want her happiness to have a fair show. And it isn't getting it.' He broke off and pointed. 'Look.'

Along the road came a party of mounted men and women. Philida and Captain Craven, Leland Boas, Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter, and two men with whom I was unacquainted. With a cry of pleasure Philida spurred her horse to a trot. Boas, seeing me, did likewise. They arrived at the car simultaneously.

'Well done, Chalice,' said Boas. 'So you found the truants, eh?'

'We found Miss Vansiter in the Rest House at Amon-tado,' said Chalice.

'The Rest House?' exclaimed Boas, then addressing me: 'My dear fellow, how did you get there?'

'I?' I replied. 'How do you mean?'

Before he could answer, Hugh Chalice said:

'And we happened to meet Praed coming down the Angora Pass three hours later.'

A held breath escaped softly through Philida's parted lips. With an irritable gesture Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter brushed imaginary dust from the skirt of her riding-habit. Craven, as ever staring at me thoughtfully, seemed indifferent to the whole affair. The two men with whom I was unacquainted exchanged looks. It was upon Boas that my attention was chiefly centred. He had taken heavy chances in planting Nancy and me on the mountain-side. It had been a hazardous move, and it had come to nothing. His skin whitened, and the muscles at the ends of his mouth twitched with a furious disappointment that it took all his control to master. A little burst of talk broke out among the company, and in the moment it lasted I whistled the first few bars of the old German Hymn of Hate. And then a surprising thing happened. From Craven came a sharp exclamation of 'Aah!' and simultaneously his mare reared up as though struck across the eyes by a whip. Next instant she was galloping up the road with Craven straining at the reins. They rounded the hairpin bend and were lost to view behind a terrace of small villas.

'After him, you chaps,' cried Chalice.

Boas and the two other horsemen broke into a canter.

Philida leaned forward in the saddle long enough to say:

'Five o'clock this evening at Atlantic Point.'

Hugh Chalice looked at me in astonishment.

'What could have startled the mare like that?'

'Was it the mare or the man?' said I, 'and if the man — why?'

Even as I spoke Craven appeared again on the section of road high above us. The mare was no longer out of control, but was going uphill at a long, raking trot. Craven did not look behind him.

'It's a funny business altogether,' said Chalice. 'Suppose I'd better run you along to the hotel now.'

'On second thoughts,' I said, 'I'll go first to the Post-Office. There's a packet of letters between my shoulders I'd be glad if you'd fish out for me. No, it's not a joke. Thanks.' I dropped the packet into my pocket and held out a hand. 'Awfully obliged. You've been a better friend than you know.'

At the Post-Office I put the packet, with a covering note, in a registered envelope, and addressed it to my bankers in Haymarket.

Then I returned to the hotel for a bath, a smoke, and a piece of sleep.

18

THERE is no spot lovelier in Ponta Rica than Atlantic Point. Like a balcony, it overhangs the sea. In the pale distances to the south faint outlines of the main archipelago fret the even curve of the horizon. Upon a natural couch of rock, tapestried with multicoloured lichens, I stretched myself, listening to the swell of waters far below me and inhaling the subtle goodness of the air. The hillside was thick with flowers as the pattern in a chintz; yellow marigolds, tufts of purple cactus and convolvulus, blue as lapis-lazuli. Among the white rocks rose tufty bushes of tamarisk and juniper.

Nothing could have exceeded the beauty of the scene and yet it was only at the dial of my watch I could bring myself to look. A certain position of the hands spelt Philida — nothing else was of consequence. I might as well have been sitting at the bottom of a pit for all the pleasure I had of my surroundings.

The hands made pitifully slow progress. I funked looking over my shoulder at the road by which Philida

would come. My eyes were glued to the dial when her voice sounded behind me.

Waiting for her — need of her — lack of her, conspired to make me all lover that afternoon. I wanted to forget everything save that she and I were together — to revel in the sheer completeness of that. Man-like, I expected a reflection of my mood in her eyes, but instead I found in them anxiety — a look of strain — that checked the words with which I should have greeted her, and startled the question:

‘Philida — is anything the matter? What’s wrong?’

She sat on the rock without even touching my hand.

‘No imagination, Nigel,’ she said, her head going from side to side.

‘Philida, dear,’ I cried, ‘what is it? I’ve waited here aching for you to come and —— What’s happened? I thought it would be marvellous — and — Philida, you haven’t been believing ——?’

She turned suddenly.

‘Believing what?’

‘These lies — that ——’

‘Oh, Nigel,’ she exclaimed, ‘to say that — think that — believe that I should want explanations.’

I was out of my depth and must have shown it, for suddenly she relented and shot out a hand and, seizing one of mine, laughed to herself as though by an order hard to obey.

I went down on my knees.

‘I’ve offended you somehow.’

She nodded.

‘Yes, by not seeing ——’

‘Seeing?’ I repeated.

‘Do you think I’ve had much of a time these last three days? Do you think it has been jolly for me with not an idea what had happened to you? You might

have been dead or something — I didn't know.' She rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand. 'Awful — it was awful. I struggled a long time not to love any one. I didn't want to leave my heart where it could be hurt so.'

'Have I hurt it?'

'You — every one. You, perhaps, because you couldn't help it — others because they meant to. And all the time I've had to hide what I felt — the fear, the pain, the anger.'

'But, my dearest, it's all all right.'

'It isn't — how can it be? You didn't imagine ——'

'Imagine what?'

'My part of it. You came to meet me with your arms out to take me — smiling as if nothing had happened, and we were just two lovers with an hour to spend together. If ever a woman deserved being sorry for, you might have been sorry for me instead of glad of me.'

I must have looked utterly blank, for she ran her fingers through my hair and, like a schoolboy, twisted it so that I faced her.

'You do — do see the justice of that, don't you? — the logic. My grievance against you is a real one, isn't it? Nigel, there was no one but you in all the world to sympathize with what I'd been through.'

'But, Philida,' I said, 'if you suffered because of me, I can only be terribly proud and glad.'

'I suppose that's the way a man feels,' she said, 'all men, but it's awful of them — wicked of them. Women aren't like that — at least, those in love are not. Did you ever think of me these last three days?'

'Every minute.'

'But not what I should be thinking, Nigel. You thought of some one to come back to — make a fuss of.'

‘If you like.’

She shook her head.

‘It seems to me you get only about half the goodness out of our possession of each other. I’ve lived inside your mind — invented your thoughts of me — but they were all wrong. Why, Nigel, you haven’t even a real trust.’

‘My dear.’

‘But you haven’t. You were afraid I might believe the tales they were telling. You’d be giving explanations now if I hadn’t stopped you.’

‘I didn’t understand,’ I protested. ‘Seeing you there — keeping me at arm’s length — I was afraid.’

‘No, you didn’t understand — and you didn’t trust properly — about half is all you’re getting, Nigel.’

‘Philida, dear,’ I begged, ‘why do we talk like this? Why waste this glorious hour?’

‘Waste?’ she repeated. ‘This isn’t waste — it’s wonderful — marvellous.’ Her arms went round my neck and she pressed her cheek against mine. ‘We’re learning each other — and that’s almost divine. My man, I love you and hate you to let me be angry with you — to give me cause.’

‘Was it cause,’ I said, ‘that I should be bursting with gladness at the sight of you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘as good as any other. Because of you I’m all made up of new emotions — joys — angers — fears — resentments and gratitudes. Am I a beast to expect you to meet any or all of them ready and unafraid, when you meet me? Not only to meet, Nigel, but to know them all ahead and know why. Things like that are one’s excuse for loving. After all, we are echoes of each other. There, now, that’s done, and you can be as angry or as pleased as you like about it. I’ve cheated dreadfully to-day, haven’t I? — be-

cause you did expect me to jump into your arms, didn't you?'

I nodded, and she slipped down to the grass beside me.

'Well, I'm there now — but I came by a different route, out of a frightened place with my nerves frayed. I'm not at all ashamed.'

'My blessed,' I whispered, 'you're the eighth wonder of the world and greater than all the rest put together.'

'Go on,' she nodded. 'I like that — it's so utterly stupid and comforting. Talk lovely nonsense to me — admiring things to make me feel smooth. I've thousands of questions to ask, but first let's be our idiot selves and snuggle like children on a doorstep — holding hands — and inventing names.'

I do not know how long we stayed there side by side — it must have been a long, long while, for presently the falling sun peeped under the shadow of her hat-brim.

'The old fellow has seen us,' I said. 'Look, he has turned quite pink with envy.'

Philida sat up, as if suddenly awakened.

'I'm cured now for a little while,' she said, 'so tell the adventures, please.'

I told her what had befallen since the night of the ball.

'That precipice,' she said. 'Why did you do it?'

'It was the only way of cheating them.'

'Did Nancy know what you meant to do?'

'I told her there was a way out.'

'She let you try?'

'I didn't wait. She would have tried to stop me, I expect. I chanced my arm and jumped for it.'

'Why would she have tried to stop you?'

‘It looked pretty risky — it was, in a way — but it was perfectly possible.’

‘You think she would have stopped you because it was risky?’

‘She’d made up her mind we’d brazen it out and hope the truth would be believed.’

‘It never would have been believed. Not here — never.’

‘I think she knew that. She was rather marvellous about it.’

‘Lucky girl,’ said Philida softly.

‘Lucky?’

‘It isn’t a bad thing to be given a chance of serving some one you’re fond of.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ I said. ‘You don’t imagine ——’

‘Why not? I’m in love with you — why shouldn’t she be?’

‘Oh, rot!’ said I.

‘Tisn’t.’ Her voice suddenly warmed. ‘Nigel, I like that girl. I wonder if she still cares for you? P’r’aps not — p’r’aps you cured her when you took away her chance and begged all the chivalry for yourself. Where was she when you shot the chute?’

‘Looking down.’

‘Oh!’ cried Philida, as if I had struck her. ‘Did you want to add murder to your other achievements? For sheer devilish cruelty!’

‘Spare me,’ I said; ‘there wasn’t much time. The rescue party turned up ten minutes later.’

‘I know — you couldn’t do otherwise. But even if you didn’t think of her — you might have thought of me! Dead men aren’t much good to any one.’

‘You wouldn’t have had me funk it.’

‘I s’pose not — I don’t know. In some natures funk-ing is a sign of grace. Don’t look at me as if I were being horrid. It’s only jealousy, Nigel.’

‘Jealousy?’

‘Um! You’ve had a marvellous time with fights and intrigues and dangers to overcome. All the things you asked for have been granted to you, and I’ve had no share in them. Excuse enough for jealousy, isn’t it?’

She had risen, and stood a pace away looking out over the sea. As she finished she turned and raised her head. Following the direction of her eyes, I saw Kenedy running towards us. He was breathless and hatless, and his face was scarlet from the effort he was making. He covered the last few yards in a series of bounds — caught his foot in a convolvulus vine and sprawled into my arms.

‘What is it, man?’ I demanded. ‘What’s the hurry? What’s the trouble?’

‘Miss,’ he said, with staggering breath, ‘beat it. It’s his Nibs.’

‘His Nibs?’ she repeated.

‘The Guv’nor. He knows you’re ’ere, miss, and he’s on his way now. Summing awful temper he’s in. Fair murderous.’

‘Here, Kenedy,’ I said. ‘Pull yourself together. What is all the nonsense?’

‘That Mr. Chalice — rung up — ’arf an hour ago. You was followed, major. “Tell Miss Philida,” says ’e. “Get there fust,” ’e says. “’Ole man’s breathing fire and brimstone,” says ’e. “And tell Mr. Praed,” ’e says, “’is number’s up.”’

‘Do you mean my father is on his way here?’

‘That’s right. If you want to ’op it, now’s your chance.’

‘But I don’t want to hop it,’ said Philida. ‘There’s nothing I want less. But it was kind of you to come and warn us.’

As she spoke, the sharp clop-clop of horses’ hoofs

from beyond the bend in the cliff road came to our ears.

'Too late,' wailed Kenedy. 'That's them, right enough.'

'Kenedy,' I said, 'go down the road and meet them. Tell them where we are.'

Philida looked at me, with a dancing light in her eyes.

'This is my show, Nigel.'

'Why not ours?' I returned. 'Go on, Kenedy. Make a move.'

Without a word, he spun round and made off by the way he had come.

The horsemen rounding the bend in the road nearly collided with him. The Governor was leading, behind him were Craven and Leland Boas. Kenedy held up his hand, and his voice came clear on the evening air.

'The major's compliments, and you'll find him a hundred yards up the road.'

The Governor half-raised the hand that held his whip, then he dropped it again. Turning his head, he rapped out an inaudible direction to Craven.

Then he dismounted and, throwing the reins to Kenedy, came towards us alone. He walked at his usual pace as though there were plenty of time for the business in hand, but anger and indignation, stored up to explosion point, quivered his small dry body from head to foot. He approached within a yard of us, and stood glaring at Philida with the muscles of his face twitching like the blade of a trembler coil. For half a minute he said nothing, then he pointed at me.

'This man leaves Ponta Rica to-morrow morning. If I had my way he would be shot. Unfortunately, our justice is too polite. The Mariana docks at 10 P.M. You, sir, will go on board to-night at eleven. The ship's captain will be informed of your record, and will

act as he thinks fit in regard to your remaining in your cabin during the voyage. Decent people should not be asked to share the society of a dirty traitor.'

'Father,' said Philida softly, 'because you are an old man, don't be a coward.'

'A coward? D'you think I want to deal with this blackguard by talking to him? It's with difficulty I leave him to the man with the better grievance. I don't know how you succeeded in fooling the people at home, Mr. Praed, but I shouldn't rely on being able to carry on the deception. If you've any sense you'll leave the ship at Cherbourg and return to your own country as unobtrusively as possible.'

'My own country,' I replied, 'is more conveniently reached from Southampton, but at present I have no intention of leaving Ponta Rica.'

'You will go on board before midnight,' he repeated, 'or you will be sent on board.'

'Father,' said Philida, 'have you gone mad to talk like that?'

'I am exercising my right to deal with undesirables.'

'You have no right to call the man I am going to marry an undesirable.'

'Listen to me, Philida,' he replied, rather kindly. 'This man is not a British subject, but a traitor and a spy, who has been clever enough to trade on your affection in order to gain his own ends.'

'That's a lie,' said Philida. 'A lie you'll never prove.'

'We shall see about the proofs. Go back to Government House at once.'

'No!' said she.

His voice rose.

'Will you obey me?'

'No. Father, you've made a ghastly mistake, and unless you realize it now you'll be broken on it.'

'I do not wish to have you *taken* back,' he said, 'but if you refuse to obey me, that is what I shall be obliged to do.'

Philida stood her ground like a rock.

'And who is to carry out your order?' she asked. 'Mr. Boas? That will be a change, since it is more usually his that you obey.'

'Philida!'

'Oh, I know well enough the influences that have been brought to bear.'

Sir Francis filled his lungs jerkily through the nostrils, like an engine getting up steam before putting out its power.

'I am influenced by nothing and by no one — nor is there need for more to be said.' Then to me: 'Your papers have been sent to the hotel with a letter stating my disapproval of the proposals made by your firm. A cable to that effect was dispatched to them this morning. In it I stated that I declined to negotiate with you any further, and was informing the Government at home of my consent to an estate development scheme. That concludes our dealings with one another.'

'So,' said I, 'you're bluffed after all. The wire-pullers have made the marionette dance to their tune, eh?'

'Take care, Mr. Praed. There is a limit to what I'll put up with.'

'That's proved to the hilt, Sir Francis. And they reached the limit, eh? — and you daren't exceed it. You walked the plank as far as your courage took you and now you're crawling back. I thought you were a pluckier man.'

'Look here ——'

But I was wound up, and went on:

'And they had you, Sir Francis — had you cold. That's the cream of the jest. It was a paper sword they frightened you with — chewed up paper from a rat's nest — only the scabbard was made of steel. You should have asked to see the blade before putting up your hands and crying "Kamerad."'

'What does all this mean?' from Philida.

'A joke between His Excellency and myself, Philida. He'll see the force of it before long.'

'But I don't understand.'

'Beaten dogs have a way of yelping,' said Sir Francis. 'Come, Philida.'

She looked helplessly from me to her father and back again.

'Better go,' I said. 'This is only a beginning. Your father thinks the matter is over. He's utterly wrong.'

'But you won't leave Ponta Rica?'

'That's for my firm to decide. Your father may employ force, in which case I shall have no choice.'

'In which case,' said she, 'he will have me to deal with.'

'You can trust me to manage this alone,' said I. 'I believe before very long your father will hold a different opinion. And then I think he will not refuse his consent to our marriage.'

I spoke confidently — arrogantly — and as I finished I saw Philida look at me with a curiously troubled expression that sent a chill through my veins.

The Governor gave a hard laugh.

'Not in a thousand years,' said he.

'In much less time.'

'Blackmailers talk that way.'

'You should know,' I answered. 'But don't be afraid. It will be a straight fight, Sir Francis, with victory for the man who has the better nerves. From what you've told me to-day I know who will win.'

He looked at me and nodded.

'I suppose we haven't seen the last of each other.' Curiosity rose above the horizon line of temper. 'What makes you think you have a chance of success?'

'Because underneath your stubborn official stupidity you are an honest man.'

For the moment he seemed uncertain how to reply.

'You may be a spy and a traitor, Praed, but I don't wonder you took people in. There's something uncommonly British in your spirit. That, however, is neither here nor there. As you are leaving the island within a few hours, you will wish to get on with your packing.'

He turned on his heel and ran a hand through Philida's arm.

'No,' she said, and wrenched herself free. 'You two are behaving like — like children. I'm not going to have my whole happiness squabbled away. You've nothing against each other but lies — misbeliefs — prejudices. This talk — it — it doesn't mean anything. Let's be ordinary; we aren't heroes and villains in a medieval romance. There's no reason in either of you — no logic — nothing. Why can't you say what you mean and cut all this talk of traitors — bluff. It — it isn't real life — it's — oh, I'm ashamed of the pair of you.'

'When you've finished teaching your elders how to conduct themselves, Philida,' said Sir Francis, 'perhaps you'll be good enough to accompany me home. This man knows what I have against him — there's no need for me to put it into words.'

'Do you know?' she asked.

I shook my head.

'No more than the dead.'

'Then why not force him to give an explanation?'

'Because,' I answered, 'I am rather glad your father chooses to lay a charge against me that he won't be able to prove.'

'Glad?'

'Yes. It does one no harm to be wrongfully accused. But when he has to substantiate his charges and fails to do so, it will be my turn to call the tune.'

Again Philida looked at me with that troubled expression.

'I'm being perfectly candid, Sir Francis. I don't know what information you have against me, or how you came by it, but I do know you've made a big mistake. It remains to be seen which of us will be the sorrier for it. This matter is too big to be ruled by any regard for persons or position. I have two objects: Philida — and the success of my firm's scheme. To both of these I mean to have your consent, willing or unwilling. I am sorry I can't offer you more chivalrous terms.'

'You mean,' said Philida, 'to get me you'd break him if necessary.'

'Yes, like a shot.'

'Try,' said Sir Francis. 'Try. I wager I know who'll be first to break.'

He turned triumphantly to his daughter.

'You see the kind of man you've chosen, Philida? A street-corner orator full of promises he'll never keep.'

His small figure swelled with the choice delight of accepting battle. He ducked his head to me in a formal bow.

'But I'll say this, Praed. You made a game show — with words.'

Philida put her hand in mine.

'Good-night,' she said. 'We've come out of it rather badly.'

'It's difficult, Philida.'

'I know. I'm remembering that. Write to me.'

'I haven't gone yet,' said I, and, stooping, kissed her fingers.

She stood a moment in silence, then almost to herself: 'There's something so plain in a wrangle. It doesn't belong when — where ——' She stamped her foot and it rang angrily upon the rock. Then, with a quick movement, she hurried away.

Once again Sir Francis bowed.

'At eleven o'clock to-night,' he said.

19

It must have been ten minutes before I noticed Kenedy. With a tact for which he deserves every credit he avoided intruding on my thoughts until I spoke to him. Even so, his presence irritated me, and I told him to get back to the hotel. I wanted to be alone — to turn over in my mind the foolish, angry scene that had taken place. I felt I had made a bad show — both for myself and my causes. At best it was poor stuff to bait and threaten a man old enough, even if not wise enough, to command respect. Pompous official obstructionist he might be, yet he was Philida's father and Governor of a British possession. In either capacity it was cruel luck to be driven to take arms against him. Philida had been ashamed of the pair of us — and rightly — and unavoidably — and in what was to come she would be more ashamed. From the set of his jaw and from the muscles that tugged at my own I knew that once started in a campaign against each other, we should never stop until an issue had been reached. And with every gain made by him against me or by me against him in Philida's opinion we should suffer loss. Our victories would be Pyrrhic.

It was unthinkable that she should remain passive — with a stake to lose on either side. The conflict was suicidal. Philida's reproach vividly recurred, that in my thoughts of her I had no vision of her thoughts. That had been true until this moment. I had accepted without inquiry. I had been pleasantly mystified by the gymnastics of her brain without troubling to realize how tremendously real a part of her those gymnastics were. I had absorbed her individuality as a personal asset — something won by the accident of affection. I saw it now as something that equally well might be lost by the accident of conduct. She might sanction a war against her father, but that war would have to be fought under a criticism so searching as to blunt every weapon and render me powerless. Doubt and disappointment had been written all over her face when I told the Governor I should trade on his mistakes. In what more hopeless case could a man find himself? I thrust my hands in my pockets and started back for the hotel.

The sun had set and the cliff road was lit by a pink after-glow fading into lavender distances. Rounding the first bend, I came upon a man seated upon a rock. His tunic lay on the grass beside him, and a few yards away a horse was grazing. As I approached, he rose and came towards me. It was Craven.

'It is my unpleasant duty,' he said, 'to present you with official orders to be on board the Mariana by ten to-night.' He handed me a sealed envelope.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I understand it isn't a very agreeable job.'

'No,' his voice sounded queer, 'no — especially as I've been looking forward to meeting you for a good many years.'

I laughed.

'You've concealed it pretty well.'

'Yes, I have. My memory got stuck up, but this morning, thanks to you, I got the hint I'd been waiting for.'

I looked at him curiously.

'Is that the reason why I'm being turned out of Ponta Rica?'

'It is.'

I shook my head.

'I've been waiting for a similar hint, but luck's been against me. You wouldn't care to give me a line?'

'Hardly necessary is it? But last time we met I had the pleasure of hitting you in the jaw.'

'And then,' said I, 'I suppose you woke up?'

He nodded. 'Six weeks later, behind a triple barbed-wire fence — in a filthy prison camp at Düsseldorf.'

'Gosh!' I exclaimed, and the doors of memory flew open. The station at Düsseldorf, the weary, broken band of prisoners herded through a spitting, snarling crowd. Myself in the foreground roaring the Hymn of Hate — the Fusilier boy's fist crashing into my face — the thud of the guard's rifle-butt — and the eyes of loathing that went blank as insensibility veiled them.

Before I could speak, Craven's hand fastened on my coat and he thrust his face within an inch of mine.

'How I've wanted to meet you!' he said in a voice husky with passion. 'It's only the lowest kind of scum who crows over beaten men.'

'Steady a minute, Craven.'

'Steady! What more do you want? Do you think mine's an easy job standing here handing official letters when all day I've been itching to knock you into a pulp? I s'pose you're not man enough to give me satisfaction — you'll skulk off with your orders and think yourself lucky to escape so light.'

'Take your hand off my coat,' I said, 'and listen to sense. You've reason enough to feel mad, but there's an explanation, if you care to apply for it.'

'Apply — apply to whom — to you?'

'No. I've no authority to give it. Ask for my record at the F.O., Craven.'

'Muck,' he said. 'Coward's muck. A lie to give you time to shin off and save your skin.'

'Very well. I can't do more than tell you. It's your own pigeon if you won't believe.'

Hatred had put him beyond the reach of common sense.

'I can't force you to fight,' he said, 'but if you've a spark of manhood, here's your chance to prove it.'

The earnestness of the appeal was almost pathetic and utterly comic. With one of those obsessions to which we are all susceptible, his years of suffering in a German prison camp had crystallized into a single ambition to bash in the face of a man who had sung the Hymn of Hate at him during the humiliation of being dragged through the streets of an enemy town. I could understand that feeling. I had understood when he risked his life by the blow he struck me. And now he was prepared to risk his reputation and position on the island for the sake of repeating that all too fleeting experience. There was something tremendously likeable and admirable in a passion such as that. And what could I do to satisfy his yearning? I knew well enough that no amount of argument would convince him that he was on the wrong track. He did not want convincing. He wanted to fight — nothing short of that would satisfy. Besides, I was not entitled to tell him the truth about my presence in Düsseldorf. The branch of the secret service to which I had belonged had as its motto 'Neither now nor

hereafter.' He could apply for information at the Foreign Office, and if they thought fit it would be given to him — but from me he could not have it. And, anyway, that would be a poor compensation for a man with a purpose set on one particular object. Even though he were made to realize beyond any doubt that I was as innocent of malice as a child unborn and that my part in the affair had been every whit as painful as his own, he would never conquer that stifled yearning for a fight. It would always hang about him like a burr that could not be shaken off. That is why I said:

'All right, if you want to have a go at me you can have it, and you needn't be afraid I'll talk afterwards.'

'Quit that,' he said angrily, but his eyes were dancing with delight. 'Quit pretending you're a sportsman. You consent only because you believe there's no other way out.'

'Craven,' I answered, 'if you talk like that it may be a better fight than I mean it to be.' So saying, I stripped off my coat and collar and squared up.

A promoter would have had difficulty to find two men better matched than Craven and myself. In weight and reach there wasn't a pin to choose between us. Of the two I think he had the harder punch, but I was quicker at keeping out of trouble, and most of the heavy stuff he put across landed in mid-air. Craven was out for a quick decision, but he fought clean and by the rules. That was made clear when I tripped and came down on one knee and he stood away until I was on my feet again. He avoided clinches, fighting at long range with clean, driving blows regular as the travel of a piston. There was a certain amount of science, but not much imagination in his work. He was aiming for a knock-out and he stuck to the programme so closely

that he hardly bothered to put in any body work. It was my beauty he wanted to spoil, and with only my head to protect I had an easy time. I wondered how long he would be able to go on shooting out lefts and rights at a chin that was always an inch beyond the limit of his reach. Few things pull a man's arms out worse than missing a mark that he has flung the whole weight of his mind and body into an effort to hit. He kept it up longer than I believed possible, and all the time his face wore an expression of absolute and complete contentment. Whatever I might have felt, he was enjoying himself to the limit. We'd been at it for about three minutes, during which time I'd done nothing but dodge, duck, and back-step, when it occurred to me that this sort of thing might go on all night unless we mixed it up a bit. Until then neither of us had been marked to speak of. The same thought must have occurred to him, for, to my astonishment, he jumped back, dropped his hands, and exclaimed:

'What's the idea? I asked for a fight — not a bag to punch.'

'You haven't punched it yet,' I retorted.

'I asked for a fight. If you can keep out of trouble — you ought to be able to make some.'

'It was you who asked for the fight.'

'Chivalry!' he taunted, 'so that's the game.' And, stooping, he picked up his tunic as though the affair was over.

'You damned fool,' I said, snatching the tunic from his hand and chucking it aside. 'Have the lot, then.'

From that point the fun began — began with a ringing blow which I stopped on the ear and returned crushingly on his solar plexus. While recovering from our mutual surprise we played short-arm scales up and down each other's slats. At the break-away he landed

a beauty that put me down for a count of four and saw me on my feet again with a much more serious purpose than the one with which I had opened the fight. Seeing me grassed gave Craven the false impression that all I wanted now was a 'finisher.' He missed the rather obvious fact that I had just begun to take him seriously. The next quarter of a minute was devoted to whacking that impression into his thick hide as fast and as hard as I could go. Three jabs over the heart — a kidney punch, and an upper-cut harder than I meant it to be convinced him that this was the business. With an expression of almost childlike surprise he flopped down on the grass, sat up again, and said:

'It's my legs.'

'Look here,' I pleaded, 'haven't we had enough?'

'No,' he gasped, but all the animosity had gone from his eyes.

It was as though we were fighting towards a common goal of mutual regard. He was distinctly dizzy when he got on his legs again, and from the way his feet dragged I was amazed that he could stand at all. This, however, was nothing to my amazement at the sudden punch he handed me. He had put into it the whole weight of his body and the last of his consciousness. We went down together in a solid and inextricable tangle. One of his legs got round my neck and my face was buried in his stomach. Our efforts to get clear of each other would have assured the success of a harlequinade. The hopeless absurdity of the two men suffering from mild concussion lying locked together like the babes in the wood attacked my sense of humour and set me off into a gust of hysterical laughter. I think Craven was more dazed than I, for my upper-cut had reached his point well and truly and his hook had been an inch too high. His swollen lips framed

a repeated 'Shut up — d'you hear. Shut up laughing.'

'Can't help it,' I gurgled. 'Take your elbow out of my stomach, damn you, and get up.'

'Get up yourself,' he mumbled, and shut his eyes very tight. When he opened them again he said: 'God, I could do with a drink. Hello!' This in surprise at seeing me.

The senseless laughter had died out of me, and we stared at one another like drunken men. It seemed impossible to find words; indeed, I believe Craven was in some doubt as to what had happened. After a while he struggled to his feet — picked up his tunic and put it on. As he had some trouble with the buttons, I helped him by doing them up.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I had a cap, somewhere.'

I found it for him and put it in his hand.

Then for another minute we stood saying nothing and gradually recovering our normal selves.

'It was a good fight,' he said at last; 'we're both about done. No good going on with it, eh?'

'Not much,' I grinned, 'unless you want to.'

He shook his head thoughtfully and muttered:

'Can't make you out quite — I wanted to do you in — but now I've tried you seem a decent chap. What was that about the Foreign Office? Ask for your record, did you say?'

I nodded.

His forehead creased with a new doubt.

'Hope we haven't made an infernal mess of this.'

'You've done that all right.'

'Ha! No — can't have.'

Shortening the reins of his horse, he hoisted himself stiffly into the saddle.

'But, anyway, we've done it now.' Then, as if in

answer to a question from me: 'Damn it all, you can't expect me to like a fellow I know to be a scab.'

Putting behind his back the hand which I believe he half wanted to offer me, he dug in his heels and rode away.

20

IN the gathering dusk I dragged my way wearily to the hotel. What with one thing and another it had been a substantially trying day. The ache in my limbs served to dull my brain against the consciousness of all-round failure. A failure I had been. There could be no question about that.

Until an hour ago I flattered myself that I held the best cards in the pack — but what use were they since I was not to be allowed to play them? I had overreached myself — stood too prominently — talked too big — accepted too many challenges — made too many enemies, and as a result I had been outclassed and was going to be chucked out like a drunk.

What was it the Governor had said?

'I have already advised the Home Government to sanction an estate development scheme.'

Something to that effect — the actual words escaped me — but they sounded the knell of the British-American Airways, Limited. Somehow I could not help feeling that my presence had been an incentive rather than a deterrent to the dispatch of that letter. Sir Francis might have shied at taking the line of least resistance if I had not been there to oppose him. That was his characteristic, to advance into the face of opposition. Not for nothing had he been named The Mule. I had shown a woeful lack of imagination at our first interview in making a stand against him — a deplorable lack of imagination. I should have understood

his mulish disposition and kept out of reach of his heels. One cannot dictate to a dictator without unpleasant consequences. And the queer part of it was that I rather liked the dry little man with his waspish body and waspish speech. He was short-sighted, egotistic, and puffed with pride of office, but beneath the veneer was something likeable and attractive. He had determination and pluck — an insolent kind of pluck that defied logical argument and stampeded him into all manner of impossible places. I think in a way he belonged to the V.C. class, which is to say, he had any amount of courage, but precious little consciousness of personal danger. For the preservation of his comforts and the elegances and advantages of his position he might tremble, but for himself not at all. That kind of man is the most difficult adversary, inasmuch as he makes an enemy with the same enthusiasm as another man makes a friend. And, having made the enemy, he looks to it that no effort is spared to bring about his enemy's defeat. Having formed the opinion that I was a blackguard, no amount of argument would convince him to the contrary. I should remain a blackguard eternally unless a miracle happened or he voluntarily changed his mind. This depressing realization pulsed through my throbbing head as I trudged along the road.

I had reached the outskirts of the town when I heard my name. The lighted windows of the Esterella were above me. Looking up, I saw Nancy seated on the stone baluster of the hotel terrace.

'Nigel Praed,' she called down, 'are you not saying *au revoir* to a friend?'

'Hello!' I answered.

'I hoped maybe you'd have come round, though I expect you've had plenty else to think of. I go aboard the Mariana at midnight.'

'Then there'll be no need for farewells, Nancy — for by the looks of things, so shall I.'

'You? You're not serious? Come up a minute.'

She met me at the top of a flight of steps, and we made our way to a seat in a small stone summer-house.

'Yes,' I said. 'They're slinging me out — deporting me as an undesirable alien.'

'Undesirable?'

'I think I'm supposed to be a German spy — or something very bad. Anyway, I'm to go. If you see some one coming aboard under escort you'll know who it is.'

'So that crowd of four-flushers have put it over, after all?'

I nodded.

'Gee!' she cried; 'but a man who skidded down a five-hundred-foot rock-face out of a sense of politeness isn't going to knuckle down to a bunch like that.'

I said: 'I'm too tired to-day, Nancy, to make promises — but I hope not.'

'And Philida?'

'Stays here, of course.'

Nancy snorted.

'I wouldn't. Where my man went, I'd go.'

'She offered,' I said.

'And then withdrew?'

'No — emphatically, no. Nancy, we're playing high — with each other as the stake. I'm not dragging any one along when the game goes against me.'

'Oh, blah!' said she. 'Love doesn't want to wait on success or failure. If it's worth taking it's good to take any time. That inhibitive stuff is too damned civilized. Yet,' she added, 'there's a queer beauty in it. What's holding her back?'

'We are, Nancy. We made a standard of success — terms of victory.'

'I know,' she nodded. 'She told me one night. Rivers to cross — mountains and dangers to overcome — and you two waiting for each other at the end of it. Looks a hungry kind of journey to me.' She stopped and put a hand over mine. 'I haven't thanked you yet, Nigel.'

'Thanked me for what?'

'For what some girls might think the poorest compliment ever paid to them.'

'I don't follow.'

She gave a little laugh.

'Jumping down a precipice rather than being found in my company.'

'What else could I do?' I answered, frowning helplessly.

'Oh, there! Unscrew that look of direct sternness from your gaze. I've nothing in me but admiration for it. And when you showed up miles and miles away at that cross valley, it was all I could do to stop myself howling like a babe. No man has a right to stir up sentiments of that kind.' She stopped abruptly and exclaimed: 'I believe I won't go back to England this trip.'

'Why not?'

'Philida may be very firm on ideals, but likely enough it 'ud help her to sustain 'em if she had a friend around.'

'You'd stop here and be with her!' I cried enthusiastically. 'Nancy, that'd be splendid. D'you mean it?'

'If you think it'd ease the situation I'll cancel my passage right now.'

I seized her hands and wrung them.

'I'd be happy with the knowledge that you were here.'

'It's a bet, then. Though,' she added, 'the enthusiasm you show to escape my company strikes me as kind of strange.' Suddenly she dropped banter and returned my pressure on her hands with the grip of perfect health and comradeship. 'Good luck, old man. Never fear! I'll keep your light shining.' And, stooping forward, she gave me a great hearty kiss on the cheek. 'Tell me, though, what did you mean by kissing me up at the Rest House this morning?'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'I was, but not all that much.'

'I don't know — but when in a few minutes a man expects to find himself in eternity, it's good to show up with something clean on his mouth.'

She laughed.

'I s'pose that answer is as good as another,' she said. 'God bless!'

'God bless!' I repeated.

21

A CABLE was delivered to me at the hotel bureau. I signed a form showing the time it was received.

'Negotiations broken off. Previous instructions cancelled. Return by first available steamer. Ribault, Zealer & Palatine.'

The peremptory tone of the orders and the signature in the full title of the firm grated horribly on my nerves. I had not imagined they would accept defeat so conclusively. At least I had expected Ribault to put up a fight. Yet my orders were precise.

Cramming the cable into my pocket, I went to my rooms. Kenedy was laying out dress clothes upon the bed.

'Pack,' I said. 'We're leaving here to-night.'

'We, sir?'

'Unless you're so fond of the place that you'd like to stay.'

The expression on his face was sufficient answer.

'All right, then, but don't talk. Pack up and get the stuff down to the ship.'

Kenedy looked at me curiously.

'Ave you 'ad a fight, sir?'

'Yes, several.'

'Some gets all the luck,' he murmured, and hauled the Gladstone bags from beneath the bed.

'Give me a cigar first and fill the case.' I threw it over to him. I had forgotten the roll of film I had put into it during my day in the cellars of the old palazzo. Kenedy shook it out.

'Pictures, that is,' he said. 'Pictures; d'you want 'em, sir?'

'Stick 'em in the Gladstone.'

The cigars brought Chalice to my mind. They were the sort he had liked. Beside the broken box was another, unopened.

'Leave those out,' I said, and, crossing to the writing-table, scribbled a line on one of the hotel cards.

DEAR CHALICE, — Thanks for your many kindnesses. Please, as an act of friendship, smoke these for me. If ever you come to Town, don't forget

Yours gratefully

NIGEL PRAED

The box with card on top was wrapped up, and I rang for a page.

'Have this sent up to Government House by a messenger,' I ordered him. 'It's for Mr. Hugh Chalice.'

'Very good, sir. There's two gentlemen below asking for you, sir.'

'Who are they?'

'Mr. Boas, sir, and Mr. Levis.'

'Tell 'em to go to hell!'

The page grinned and retired with the parcel.

I went into the sitting-room, picked up the telephone, and asked for Government House.

'Hello!' said the voice of the exchange clerk.

'Miss Prothero, please.'

'What name, sir?'

'Oh, Huntington Smith.'

It was likely to serve better than my own.

I heard the buzz and snap as the connexions were plugged in, then Philida's voice:

'Yes, Nigel?'

'You guessed?'

'Of course. I was waiting — you were bound to ring me. Is there anything to tell?'

'I've been recalled by my firm.'

'You expected that.'

'Yes, I suppose. Still, it hurt a bit.'

'Poor Nigel. This isn't our day, is it?'

'Not altogether.'

'Captain Craven has been telling father he believes there's a mistake about you.'

'Yes?'

'You know what father is.'

'No remission of the sentence.'

'He's got his teeth in.'

'Philida!' I said; 'Philida, that I love so and am just beginning to understand!'

'Well?'

'How fond of him are you?'

'Of father?'

'Yes.'

'I know what you mean, but it doesn't turn on that,

Nigel. You're bound to fight each other — it's inevitable and it's bound to hurt me. But I wouldn't have you not fight for fear of hurting me. In love one expects to be hurt — only — only don't crow if you win, dear — and don't be savage if you lose. That's a hard thing to ask — terribly hard, but you do see that, in spite of anything I say, I can't help being a referee.'

'Philida,' I said gloomily, 'I've never entered the lists with less confidence.'

'I like you for that most awfully. Just as I'd hate it if you were vindictive or too chivalrous. You're too young for the one and he's too old to accept the other. Poor Nigel, it's a horrible tangle.'

'How's it to be done, then — how's it to be fought?'

'I think on merits,' she said. 'I see no other way. Just cold merits.'

'One forgets merits when one's hit below the belt. Already you're asking yourself if I shall be equal to the task.'

'That isn't fair, Nigel. But when a woman's fond she sees her man so very clearly.'

'Sees through him and beyond, to where disappointment is found.'

'No — you translated that look of mine all wrong.'

She meant the look she had given me when I faced her father with promise of battle.

'There was no disappointment — a little shock, perhaps, that two men, who at least are part of me, should be feeling round for each other's throats. I didn't mind the threats and vauntings — they had to be ——'

'What, then?'

'I minded a little when you said, "I'll be perfectly candid with you, Sir Francis," as though you were strong enough — certain enough of success to show

your hand. It was that — that gesture made me shiver. Do you understand?’

‘In a way.’

‘Are you angry?’

‘I’m not angry.’

‘It was stupid of me to tell you, perhaps, but it’s our way to tell, Nigel. The latest edition of each other’s mind for each other to read. That was mine — if yours is full of angry headlines I shan’t complain.’

‘Mine has only the questions I’ve asked you.’

‘And no others?’

‘One more.’

‘But you know the answer to that.’

‘It may be a long while before I shall hear it again.’

‘Of course I do, Nigel — with all my heart, with all of me.’

It was agony to hear the deep sincerity of her voice in that empty room with nothing but the ugly black mouth of a telephone before me.

‘A letter care of Marshall would find me, Philida.’

‘I’ll remember.’

‘I’ve my arm round you, my dear,’ I said. ‘I’m holding you tightly for fear you might slip away.’

In the silence that followed I could almost imagine it was true. The wire whispered catchily and uneven as a lover’s breath. Then thin as a sigh came her voice:

‘Never fear — soon, dear — soon.’

‘Philida,’ I called — and again, ‘Philida!’

There was no answer. The wire changed its tune, clicking and popping with the business of an exchange. Some one said, ‘Have you finished?’

I hung up the receiver, and as I did so the door was opened and Leland Boas and the Jew, Levis, came into the room.

They were in evening dress, and their right hands were buried significantly in jacket pockets.

'We may come in, Praed?' said Boas. 'You don't mind? We waited until you had finished telephoning.'

I made no reply.

'You are alone?'

'My servant is in the next room, packing.'

'Packing? — oh, yes — I don't suppose we need trouble him. You'll have guessed what we are here for?'

'Souvenir hunting?'

'What imagination. Are you going to oblige us? I hardly think you'll refuse. Though in this affair we may have been in opposite camps, in the greater affairs of six years ago our sympathies were united.'

It was a tacit admission of his German nationality.

'Ah,' said I, 'so you've heard about my shocking record?'

He nodded.

'Queer, isn't it, that after our continued efforts to trip you up, you should be knocked off your perch by a clumsy ass like Craven? Fate's very queer. When they told me I was sorry for you.'

'Thanks,' I said; 'it was bad luck, wasn't it?'

'Very bad — cruel luck, for you've been astonishingly thorough.'

'Yes — almost as thorough as you were, Boas, when you made a thousand-mile trek through the African jungle for the purpose of breaking up your own headstone.'

His mouth twitched uneasily, then steadied itself.

'I don't understand that,' said he. 'However, it doesn't matter. The point is, we've won and you've lost. I hope there's no ill-feeling on your side — for there is none on ours.'

'Then why not take your hand out of your pocket in case I want to shake it,' I suggested. 'Your little friend, there, can keep me covered during the civilities.'

Boas laughed.

'That *is* funny,' he said, 'and perhaps we are being a little too cautious. But sometimes when a man's been worsted he loses his head.'

'Just so,' I answered, 'but to prove that I haven't lost mine, here's a present for you.' And drawing from my waistcoat pocket the receipt for the registered letter I had dispatched that morning I tossed it across to him.

Leland Boas caught the flimsy wisp of paper and ran his eye over it.

'The manager, Barke's Bank, Haymarket. This doesn't tell me much.'

'Those letters, of course,' said I. 'You didn't think I'd be so foolish as to cart 'em round with me?'

Boas made no attempt to conceal his disappointment.

'Yes,' he said. 'That complicates matters.' Then suddenly he rounded on Levis. 'You blasted fool, why didn't you tell me at once about the tobacco-pouch?'

'How was I to know, Mr. Boas? I thought he was talking rubbish.'

'Then again,' I interpolated, 'he had a fair amount of washing to do. Perhaps that drove it out of his mind.'

Levis snarled at me.

'Those letters are no use to you,' said Boas.

'Agreed. The only person they are any use to is His Excellency.'

'Just so. They were to have been returned to him to-morrow morning — by a repentant lady.'

'I'm afraid that'll be quite out of the question. She might try her luck with the envelopes.'

'I suppose you know he has already written to the Home Government stating his acceptance of my company's proposals?'

'Suggesting the acceptance.' I amended.

'It amounts to the same thing.'

'Not at all. I foresee a time when he may write again suggesting the rejection of those proposals.'

'You're quite incorrect in imagining the letters influenced his decision. I doubt if they have influenced it at all.'

'Just so,' I replied, 'which explains your apathy in the matter of whether or not I can be persuaded to give them up.'

'Very clearly reasoned,' said Boas. 'Perhaps I understated their importance. You read them, of course?'

'Who wouldn't?' I replied non-committally. 'Other people's letters are always more interesting than one's own.'

'I was almost hoping you were that kind of ass who'd think it unsporting.'

'One can be too squeamish,' I returned.

'H'm! Number five startled you, I expect?'

I shook my head.

'What's the good of being startled?'

'Levis,' said Boas, 'wait in the passage.' Then when Levis had gone: 'How about a cheque for five thousand for number five? The rest you can do what you like with. After all, an attack on moral character has killed very few soldiers. But number five is different.'

'Very different.'

'Few men survive being accused of murder.'

With difficulty I mastered my surprise, and said;

'Murder, rubbish, manslaughter.'

It was a lucky shot.

Boas raised his shoulders.

‘My dear fellow, could he prove the dividing line — with India in the state it is to-day, when placation is the key-note of rule? The incident having happened fifteen years ago won’t help him. Suppose he said the fellow struck me first and I struck him in self-defence? A living white man’s word against a dead brown man who can’t speak for himself. Not too good, eh? And look at the circumstances of the case. Two men, a brown and a white, together on survey — a row — no witnesses — then the white man returned to camp with a tale of how the crocodiles had got his subordinate. In the old days, yes, but nowadays, no. You remember the trouble there was over that Amritsar affair. Let this story leak out and His Excellency is done.’

‘His Excellency himself is responsible for the leakage,’ I said. ‘He should not have written the letter.’

Boas made a gesture of despair.

‘I agree, it is unbelievable. Can you credit it? To destroy all evidence against himself and create it in a letter to a woman! It baffles me — what’s the explanation? Conscience? When will men realize if they wish to succeed conscience is the first thing to jettison.’

For my own part I said nothing — I was thinking of a tortured man who, by accident, had brought about a tragedy — who through fear and luck had been able to conceal it, then to ease the torment in his mind had confessed the whole truth to an utterly worthless confidante. Small wonder Francis Prothero went through the world with a garment of anger to hide an ever-present fear. His position hung on a thread, which at any moment might snap and drop him out of the region of crowns and batons into depths obscured

by bars. If ever I was sorry for a man it was the Governor of Ponta Rica.

'Boas,' I said, 'besides you and me and the woman, how many know the actual contents of that letter?'

'No one else.'

I drew a breath of relief.

'Good.'

'Why so? What are you thinking?'

'I was thinking,' I said, 'if that lily pond below the window were full of crocodiles I could hardly serve humanity a better turn than by dropping you and the Nuñez-Hunter woman into the middle of it.'

'And I was hoping,' he answered slowly, 'you were going to be sensible.'

'That's sense, Boas, bald sense, with a bit of justice thrown in.'

He came a step nearer.

'Take care, Praed — those letters'll do you more harm than good. A word from me that they're in your possession and that you mean to use them, and you'll find yourself in jail as a blackmailer.'

'Shall I?' I retorted. 'Did you? Was that your experience? Were you jugged? Was she? If Prothero funk'd it, then why shouldn't he funk it now?'

'Praed!' he warned me. 'Praed, you're walking near the edge.' And his hand dropped back into his jacket pocket. 'I give you fair warning. I've too much at stake to take chances now. Either those letters are returned to me or, by God, you'll never live to use them!'

'Get on with it, then,' I cried, and suddenly broke into German. 'Shoot away, Boas. You've enough influence out here to make it all right with the authorities. "I shot this man for the good of the State — my lord. He was a danger to humanity, and I shot

him." And when the pressmen ask where you learnt your British patriotism you'll be able to answer: "In the Vaterland — in Germany — in the rape of Louvain over the bodies of dead women, in the time before I borrowed the name of an English corpse and buried my own in an African jungle."'

I spoke madly — at the end of my tether — careless of consequence, and as I spoke the hand in Boas's jacket pocket rose inch by inch until it was pointing at my head. And as the hand rose so his brows fell, and his lids half closed over eyes that focused on an exact spot between my own. I heard the hiss of an intake breath — drawn and held — marked the sudden rigidity that comes over a man before a shot is fired — and saw the double doors behind him flung open and a corporal and two ordinary rank and file standing in the aperture.

'Orders to see you safely aboard, sir,' said the N.C.O. I threw up my head and laughed.

'Safely aboard. Ha! that's good. You've come in the nick of time, corporal.'

Leland Boas stepped back, glowering and impotent.

'We don't want to make any trouble, sir. If you care to walk ahead we could follow, casual like.'

I picked up my hat.

'No fear, corporal, the closer you stick the better I'll be pleased. One can't be too careful in a place like this. I've been promised safe escort, and I mean to have it.'

An order rang out crisply as on parade.

The two gunners formed up on either side of me. One of them was grinning.

'Put your face straight,' said the corporal. 'Think you're at the pictures, or what is it? Good Gawd! it 'ud take the Pope of Rome to make a soldier of you. Ready, sir?'

I nodded.

'Party, 'shun! By your left, quick march!'

Thus, with military honours, I left the Island of
Ponta Rica.

PART III

PART III

I

ANY fears I may have entertained in regard to being confined to my cabin were swiftly removed. The captain of the Mariana turned out to be an officer whom I had met professionally during the war when he was commanding one of those mystery ships about which there was so much speculation. He had issued orders that I should present myself directly I came aboard. To that interview I went with my chin out, and found myself in the presence of a friend.

‘You bore a different name in those days, Praed, and it wasn’t in the contract to ask for the real one,’ said he, ‘but I’d recognize your shop-front in a thousand. What’s all this damned nonsense about suspicious aliens? Been photographing the stone cannon balls outside Government House, or looking over the half-door into a quartermaster’s stores?’

I shook my head and laughed, although actually I was riled to the marrow at the way I’d been treated.

‘I’ve a deuce of a screed here about you,’ he went on, ‘and was expecting a very dangerous merchant. What’s the story?’

‘A queer one, but it isn’t ripe for telling yet awhile.’

‘How’d it be if I slipped up to Government House and put you straight? There’s time to do it before we sail.’

I shook my head.

‘I won’t bother you. It’s rather an intricate affair, Marriot, and best left alone.’

‘Still, a word in season ——’

'This isn't the season,' I cut in. 'Just now the Governor's broadcaster is working strong, but his receivers are out of order.'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean, he can only hear his own voice.'

'Have it your own way,' said Marriot, 'but one thing's certain: I'm not risking my position by keeping you shut up. You've a free run, as far as I'm concerned. It was like his damned impudence to give me orders. He may command that lump of unhealthy rock over there, but he doesn't command this ship. Some of these chaps with legislative and executive powers are too big for their jack-boots. Whiskey?'

We had a couple of drinks, and the talk drifted back six or seven years, concerning itself with the names of men — with a foggy night at the mouth of the Scheldt, and those little bits of personal reminiscence which, in the aggregate, are the foundations of history.

Before turning in Marriot showed me the Governor's letter. It was certainly most libellous, and for the second time that night it struck me that if ever a man was addicted to committing hara-kiri with his own fountain pen, that man was Francis Prothero. Without definitely accusing me of being a spy, he implied as much by stating that I had held a commission in the British Army in '14 and '15 — relinquished it on February 22, 1915, vide Part II orders under a quoted serial number and the 'London Gazette,' 27.2.15, and was seen six months later in Düsseldorf jeering at a party of British prisoners. From this but one conclusion could be drawn.

It was clear evidence of the Governor's inability to realize any point of view other than the one convenient to his argument.

He disliked me because I had interfered with him

— and because I aspired to marry his daughter. Therefore I was a blackguard and should be put under restraint.

‘I have taken it upon myself,’ he wrote, ‘to sign an order of deportation, and it will rest with you what restrictions you place upon his freedom. I should advise ——’

There was a great deal of advice. I handed the letter back.

‘You’ll keep that, I suppose?’

‘Obviously.’

I thought for a moment. It was evident no single charge against me could be substantiated, and that by the very act of making them Sir Francis had put himself into a position that I might easily turn to good account.

This pleasant realization was swiftly followed by a sense of doubt. This was the first round in our fight, and he had overreached himself. The chance was open to knock him out in the counter. An easy chance — too easy.

‘Why keep it,’ I replied quickly, ‘if you don’t mean to take his advice? After all, it’s a damned stupid letter. Why not destroy it?’

Marriot shook his head.

‘I can’t do that. The circumstances of your coming aboard will have to be represented to my directors.’

‘Oh,’ said I, and remembered the particular pains there had been to prevent my booking a passage a few weeks earlier. ‘I dare say the old man’s reputation will be safe enough in their hands.’

‘It was of yours I was thinking,’ he replied. ‘If there’s a row you can be sure the company’ll protect your interest.’

I grinned.

'Perhaps. Though sometimes outside considerations influence even the righteous.'

'What are you driving at?'

'Well, it wouldn't surprise me if that letter found its way into the board-room fire and my reputation with it.'

Marriot's forehead ruckled into lines.

'There's something queer about all this.'

'You're right,' I agreed, 'there is. There's a very complicated situation, old fellar.'

'But what I can't fathom is this: Here's a letter which contains a pretty heavy attack on you as a person. I'm prepared to believe there's been a huge mistake somewhere that you could prove if you wished.'

'Well?'

'Then what the devil do you want to destroy the letter for?'

'I don't want to destroy it — in fact, I could make very good use of that letter.'

'Then why ——'

'It's hard to define, but I'm in a strange dilemma. I can't afford to be a brigand, and I shrink from appearing before a startled world in the character of Don Quixote.'

'H'm!' he grumbled. 'That may mean something to you.'

'Something!' I repeated. 'It means everything, Marriot.'

'But you're not the kind of man to offer your enemy the other cheek.'

'Not altogether, but I'm working on a system by which if I don't actually love my enemies I am trying to persuade them to love me.'

'Oh, bunk!' said Marriot shortly. 'If that's the

talk you treated 'em to ashore no wonder they kicked you out.'

We had bad weather on the homeward voyage — encountered head seas, and arrived at Southampton twenty-four hours late. As I stepped ashore an obvious Scotland Yard detective came forward and addressed me.

'Name of Nigel Praed?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'I hold a warrant for your arrest, sir, on a charge of attempted bribery and corruption of a public servant. I have to warn you anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used as evidence against you.'

In blank amazement I asked:

'Is this a joke?'

A yard away a newspaper reporter was scribbling notes. To left and right I heard the click of press cameras.

The detective produced his warrant. It seemed to be in order.

I motioned to Kenedy.

'Take the luggage to the Savoy Hotel. Wire Mr. Ribault that I've been arrested.' Then to the detective: 'Where am I to be charged?'

'Bow Street. To-morrow morning.'

'And in the meantime?'

'There's a private compartment on the train, sir.'

A cinema operator, collecting items of pictorial news, turned the handle of his machine cheerfully, as with the detective at my side I walked through an avenue of astonished onlookers.

to laugh at himself behind prison bars. My own, I regret to say, failed completely as the door of my cell in Bow Street police station closed behind me. In a fury of anger I strode up and down the narrow slip of floor between the bed and the table. The rank injustice of my detention robbed me of the power to consider details of my defence. When the charge was read over by the inspector on duty, I had laughed at the absurdity of it, but there had been no response to my laughter in the inspector's eyes. His manner had been official and dispassionate. Had I been a drunk — a thief — a swindler — I could not have been treated with less ceremony. The substance of the charge — for I forget the legal phraseology — was to the effect that I had attempted, for the motives of personal gain, to bribe and corrupt a public servant. The public servant was Hugh Chalice — the bribe a box of cigars.

‘Rot!’ I exclaimed. ‘Rot! Why, at the time I sent them I had received instructions to withdraw from ——’

I was not allowed to proceed.

‘You will have an opportunity to answer the charge when it comes before the Bench. If you wish for legal advice ——’

‘I do. I want Sir Marshall Livesay.’

The inspector looked at me as though I were trying to be funny.

‘You cannot instruct counsel. You will have to make an application through a solicitor.’

I looked at the clock. It was after 6 P.M. Mergle, my own lawyer, punctually left his office at six every night and travelled to Brighton. It would be impossible to get hold of him.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘any lawyer.’

‘There may be difficulty in getting a lawyer at this

time of day. You may have to wait until the morning.'

'Then I will telephone Sir Marshall direct.'

The inspector shook his head.

'You are not allowed to do that. If you are prepared to pay for it, a wire can be sent. I must warn you it is waste of time.'

I avoided the retort that Marshall was a friend of mine, and put some money on the desk. The wire was written and handed to a constable for dispatch.

'Number 13,' said the inspector.

'Look here,' I began, but a hand on my shoulder discouraged further argument.

After that the click of a lock — the shooting of a bolt, and silence, only broken by the creaking of the gaoler's boots and snatches of song from a 'drunk and incapable' farther down the corridor.

About an hour later the door was opened, and a waiter in a white jacket was shown in, and asked me if I had any orders. I asked for some sandwiches, partly, I think, because being able to pay for and choose my own meals offered a suggestion of freedom.

After an eternity they arrived, but I left them untouched. I did not seem to be able to sit down. The sense of tightness inspired by my quarters could only be relieved by continuous motion. Four paces this way — a turn — four paces that way — a turn. It was maddening, but better than stopping still.

About ten o'clock the gaoler spoke to me through the grille.

'You lie down, old man — you're keeping others awake.'

I took no notice, and went on with my futile prowling.

Looking back, I have no great opinion of my conduct that night. My failure on the island ending in

being locked up in this ignominious fashion conspired to rob me of mental balance. There is a state of mind which, for some physical reason I can't attempt to explain, shifts its centre of suffering to the breast-bone, setting up a pressure there that is unbearable.

Impotent anger begotten of disappointment and injustice is the surest cause. It is the most hateful of pains — as well as the most dangerous. Hateful because there is no immediate remedy or relief — dangerous because it inspires feelings of such acute vindictiveness. If Prothero had been in the cell with me that night I should have throttled him. He had played so low — had traded on his position to deal the dirtiest cards in the pack. I had meant to fight him with clean hands, and it would be his own fault if the thing turned into a rough-and-tumble. My deportation from the island, his libellous letter to Marriot, and, finally, a malicious prosecution. Whose fault would it be if I were driven to fight with the same weapons? Then came the thought of Philida — Philida watching with creased and puzzled brows — that fettered action. For that was the sublime irony of the situation. She robbed me of the power to hit back.

I might devise a hundred ways of attacking Prothero, and every one would result in my own annihilation through self-inflicted injuries. In that moment, my whole mind intent on vengeance, I almost resented the love I had for Philida — cursed it as a millstone, a drag on the wheel.

It is not easy to write such a confession, neither easy nor creditable, but I should shirk a duty in failing to set it down. In the light of what follows it has, moreover, a special bearing. Philida stood in the pathway to herself, and because of that I resented my love for her.

In this state of mental ferment Marshall found me. He had been at the House and did not receive my wire until his return.

The gaoler unlocked my cell and conducted me to a private room where Marshall was waiting. Quite a different Marshall from the disreputable vagabond of Hardelot. Very precise, lean, and grey. He showed no enthusiasm at meeting me. He had responded to the call of friendship, but it was as a professional man he came — not as a friend. I was disappointed at his lack of warmth, for in moments like that one expects from one's friends sympathy and concern which actually are of no value whatever.

'All right,' he told the gaoler. 'I know this gentleman. You wait outside.'

This may have been a privilege of greatness, I don't know. When we were alone he said:

'What have you been up to?'

I broke out excitedly.

'This is the most abominable ——'

He waved me down.

'Cut that. I've seen the charge sheet. Can the charge be proved?'

'Lord, no — it's a piece of sheer ——'

'Yes, yes, never mind the asides.'

'But damn it, Marshall ——'

'Did you send a present to this man or did you not?'

'I sent him a box of cigars — he'd been decent to me ——'

'I dare say — that's nothing to do with it. Then you admit bribery?'

'There was no bribery. It was an act of common friendship.'

'Prove it.'

'The Governor himself two hours before the cigars

were sent informed me that he had broken off negotiations with my firm,' I replied exultantly.

Marshall was unimpressed.

'That's your case?'

'Yes.'

'It's no good.'

'No good?'

'None whatever. In a great many cases negotiations are broken off and subsequently reopened. Most big business deals are done that way, and you know it.'

'But I had his word that he had closed with Boas's development scheme.'

'It was not in his power to close with any offer. That rests with the Colonial Office. You've no case, Nigel.'

I began to lose my temper.

'Haven't I? I tell you the whole thing from beginning to end is a ramp. Listen to this ——'

I told him how I had been deported from the island.

'That's beside the mark,' said he. 'Don't go up in the air. We know you can clear yourself of that charge, but he didn't know. In his opinion you were an alien with a nasty record, and possibly engaged in espionage. In the circumstances he acted for the benefit of the community in chucking you out.'

'But, Marshall,' I stormed, 'don't you see the whole business is made up of bias, personal grievances, and gains? He's rigged this case against me so that he can put through a deal to his own advantage.'

'You say so,' said Marshall, 'and that's an expression of opinion. Opinion doesn't exist in law. If you can prove that case — with reliable evidence — you might institute proceedings against him for malicious prosecution. Can you?'

'I dare say I could.'

'And that's what you mean to do?'

'Yes,' I answered savagely, 'at least, it is what I want to do — but — but ——'

'I think I realize your difficulty,' he said with a really human note in his voice. 'One has to step lightly on a future father-in-law's corns.' He may have seen danger of our talk taking a sentimental turn, for without giving me time to answer he was back to the original question. 'But if you're to clear yourself of this bribery business, you must put up better evidence than so far you've offered.'

'I tell you my business with Ponta Rica was ended,' I repeated. 'I had a cable from my firm confirming that fact and ordering my return.'

Marshall looked at me pityingly.

'Then why didn't you say so, you ass, instead of losing me a night's rest listening to all that other nonsense? What time did the cable arrive?'

'The evening of the day I sailed.'

'Was that before or after you sent the cigars?'

'Before.'

'You can prove that.'

'Yes, a page took the parcel. I signed his time chit. The hotel authorities could verify.'

'Got the cable?'

'The inspector has — with the rest of my stuff. It's in my wallet.'

He nodded.

'I'll look after that.'

'Do I have to stop here?' I asked.

'We'll apply for bail when the charge is read tomorrow. The case will be remanded for a week against the arrival of witnesses.'

'What witnesses?'

'The Governor, of course. Chalice and anybody else concerned. Our defence can wait.'

'The Governor,' I repeated. 'Do you mean ——'

'It was in the paper that he sailed the day before yesterday.'

His words brought me to my feet and set me pacing the room.

'Has he?' I said; 'has he? To kill two birds with one stone, I suppose. To get the estate scheme through and polish me off.' I stopped and clenched my fist. 'Lord, Marshall, you're an ambitious man — you've imagination. You can guess what I feel about this.'

'I wish you'd sit down,' said Marshall.

'I'd set my mind on two objects, and I look like losing them both.'

'Both sides can't win,' said he.

I gripped his arm.

'I've the power to win,' I cried. 'I've the power if I had the pluck to use it.'

'Well, why not?'

Again that dull ache bore down in my breast, bore with the weight of a horse's hoof.

'I can't — I'm tied — tied hand and foot. Never was man in a more hopeless muddle. I hadn't realized before to-night, Marshall, that whatever else I may be, I'm a damned bad loser.'

He rose and held out a hand.

'Go to bed,' said he. 'Dare say it isn't much of a one, but such as it is, go to it. I'm to tell you Marian sends her love and says you'd better come and stop with us when — er — ' — he gave a short laugh — 'when you're free to do so.'

At the door he turned.

'But, by the way, Nigel, if you're to be cleared of that bribery charge, get it into your thick head beyond

all shadow of argument that you were sacked by your firm before you sent those cigars. Sacked, do you understand, sacked and recalled.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'That's a pleasant reflection to add to the rest.'

'It may be — but until that charge is withdrawn any effort made by you to open up fresh discussions in regard to that Ponta Rica aërodrome will be made at the expense of liberty. *Compris?*'

He left the door open when he went out. The gaoler conducted me back to my cell and locked me in for the night.

3

ONCE in my youth I had made an appearance at Bow Street police station pursuant on boat-race night revelry. I had climbed an arc-light standard, driven a hansom cab, got mildly binged, and in company with other glad spirits had swept the pavements on the north side of Piccadilly. On that occasion we were all of us very properly proud of being jugged, regarding it as part of a gentleman's equipment, without which one could not properly claim to have fledged one's infant fluff.

But it was in no such mood I took my place this particular morning on a long yellow bench in the waiting-room. On my first visit the company had been select — now it was the reverse. There were girls with frightened eyes, from which the water-black, tear-diluted, had run in smears and courses over painted cheeks. Girls too ignorant to have learned to avoid the pitfalls of their calling. They were suffering part of their education. There was a man who stated that he was up for 'pinching brollies.'

'Pinchin' brollies! I arst you. When 'arf these dooks

and lords is pinchin' 'em all day long and not a word said. You arst the 'all porter at the Athenyum, 'e'll tell you.'

In a corner was a wisp of poor draggled wretches of the kind whose bodies move with significant restlessness beneath the rags they wear. Seated alone was a drunken woman — still drunk — I would hazard always drunk, nodding her head continuously and repeating snatches of abuse against some invisible adversary. Then there was a man who looked as though he might have been a clerk before he became a medium for expressing terror. The poor devil was unable to take his eyes off the barred window and the square of sky beyond. Beside him was a huge gorilla-like man with hairy hands swinging below his knees as regularly as the pendulum of a clock. Upon his face was written the story of blunted understanding — and a mind that could only respond to the stimulus of crime. My mates in misfortune were not attractive.

Intermittently a name was called and repeated down echoing corridors. Then one of us would come to life — startled life — and be hurried away to know the best or worst.

The girls were the first to be dealt with, and they went, some with fear that robbed their feet of certainty, others brazenly, and still others with an air of disinterested resignation, as though nothing mattered one way or another.

It was an eternity before I heard my name. As I entered the court and went into the dock a marked activity broke out among the members of the press. I suppose they were busy writing descriptions of my appearance. The court was unusually full. I looked about me, but I could see no sign of Marshall. It was foolish to expect him to show up at that stage, but I

should have welcomed the sight of a friend — for the prisoners' dock is probably one of the loneliest places in the world. My arrival had excited a certain amount of curiosity. There was a good deal of nodding and whispering, which was suppressed by the usher.

A voice I recognized as Kenedy's sang out lustily: 'Give it to 'em, major.'

'Turn that man out of court,' said the magistrate.

There was a scuffle, a few words of altercation, and a momentary draught down the back of my neck as a swing door opened and closed. Sounds of argument died away in the echoing hall beyond the court.

'Yes?' said the magistrate.

The charge against me was read by some one with a reverberant voice that never changed its key.

The detective who had met me at Southampton gave evidence of arrest.

An adjournment of a week was asked for by the prosecution against the arrival of witnesses and the collection of evidence. This was granted.

A very tired-looking man at the solicitors' table rose, and, speaking on my behalf, asked for bail.

The magistrate seemed doubtful.

'The case preferred against the accused is a very serious one and I question the advisability.'

It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut on hearing that. I bit the tip of my tongue to help me do it.

The very tired-looking man in a voice more tired than ever asserted his confidence that when his worship was informed of the name of the gentleman who was prepared to go surety on behalf of the accused the objection would not be sustained. He begged leave to name Mr. Justice Lowrie.

'Intimately acquainted with the accused and pre-

pared to stand surety to any amount. The judge,' he added, 'is in court.'

An old man rose in the well of the court, and I recognized my learned friend of the shrimping net, who had cuddled Nancy Vansiter in the car at Hardelet. The magnificent old sportsman favoured me with a friendly nod. Before the assault of such heavy artillery the objection was withdrawn.

Bail was granted for two thousand pounds.

The case was adjourned for one week, and I was warned to present myself at the court at 9.45 A.M. on the 13th instant.

As I retired from the prisoners' dock my place was occupied by the gentleman who stole umbrellas.

The very tired-looking solicitor left the courtroom in my wake. His work over, much of his fatigue seemed to have departed. He shook hands and told me not to worry.

'I have little doubt, Mr. Praed, the charge against you will be quashed before the next hearing. Sir Marshall and Mr. Ribault have an appointment with the Public Prosecutor this morning. Sir Marshall telephoned Mr. Ribault last night after he left you.'

'But he was not in court,' said I.

'Sir Marshall advised him not to appear in court. You will remember you had been dismissed by the firm.'

'Recalled,' I said.

'Dismissed. Sir Marshall hopes you will lunch with him in Cadogan Gardens at one-thirty. In the meantime I would suggest a few oysters at Miss Driver's. The Colchesters this season are particularly fine and fat, and with a glass of Chablis to bring out the flavour ——'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I think a walk would do me more good. A walk and a shave.'

‘In that case,’ said the solicitor gloomily, ‘I shall have no choice but to return to Gray’s Inn. Oysters and alcohol must be consumed in company or they become a vice. Happy to have been of service. Here is my card. Good-day.’

He departed, stroking his drooping moustache with an air of disappointment.

4

OUTSIDE the court I saw Kenedy. He had fraternized with a number of Covent Garden porters, though for what purpose I cannot say. Possibly, if freedom had been denied me, he may have contemplated the formation of a rescue party. He was quite capable of something of the kind, his loyalty being of the brand that blinds reason and overrides common sense. At the sight of me he emitted a joyous whoop and charged up the steps.

‘Well done, major — good for you, sir. Didn’t I tell you, boys, he’d be too sharp for them lawyers?’

I told him to shut up and come along. I did not escape, however, without going through a barrage of press cameras. One particularly eager reporter followed me to the door of the taxi and asked if there was anything I could give his paper.

‘Nothing relative, of course, Mr. Praed, because the law wouldn’t allow — but just a word.’

I gave him the word with the comfortable assurance that even in these days of modern journalism no editor would consent to print it.

The crowd, overhearing an expression dear to their heart, raised a cheer as we drove away.

‘Where’s the luggage?’ I asked.

‘Savoy, sir.’

‘Better fetch it away. They probably will have little

use for visitors who are under the shadow of the law.'

I put my head out of the window and told the driver to drop me at Shipwright's.

'Where'll I go, sir?'

'Get rooms somewhere. Take 'em in your name.'

Kenedy shook his head.

'Seems an 'ole-in-the-corner business for us, sir.'

'We're in both,' I replied, and relapsed into silence.

One thing certain was, until I was cleared of the charge I had no intention of accepting Marian's invitation. It was like her generosity to suggest it; but there was a limit to the responsibility one could lay on one's friends. Neither did I mean to put up at an hotel and expose myself to the risk of being invited to go away. Clubs were out of the question, for although I had little doubt old friends and acquaintances would be full of regard and sympathy and confidence in my ability to clear myself, I preferred not to give them the opportunity. I was a suspect, and until I ceased to be a suspect I meant to lie low. It is an unpleasant experience to be denied the right of access to one's familiar haunts — most unpleasant. Mentally I chalked it up in the score against Sir Francis Prothero. It came over me suddenly that perhaps I'd better not go to Shipwright's after all, but drop into a side-street barber-shop where I should be less likely to meet men I knew.

Accordingly in Coventry Street I told the driver to stop.

Telling Kenedy to call at Cadogan Gardens at two o'clock to tell me what he had done about the rooms, I got out and drifted down the narrow ways at the back of the Prince of Wales's Theatre.

I found a small barber and stationers' in Whitcomb Street. I was given an illustrated paper to read while being shaved. The front page exhibited my portrait in

company with the detective at Southampton. It was titled, 'Arrest of Well-Known Engineer,' and below:

Mr. Nigel Praed, arrested yesterday at Southampton as a result of information received from Ponta Rica. He will come before the magistrates at Bow Street to answer to a charge of attempted bribery and corruption.

'Makes you wonder, don't it?' said the barber, who had been looking over my shoulder. 'Reckon there's a lot o' bribery goes on one way and another. Dirty gimes these big blokes get up to — any trick.'

Placards of the evening papers were thick as I crossed Pall Mall half an hour later:

RETIRED JUDGE GOES BAIL FOR DEFENDANT
IN BRIBERY CASE.

NIGEL PRAED IN THE DOCK.

PONTA RICA SCANDAL. SPECIAL CABLE.

The latter paper I bought and read on a bench in Saint James's Park.

Mystery surrounds the person of Nigel Praed, who was arrested yesterday at Southampton and appeared before the magistrates at Bow Street this morning to answer to a charge of attempted bribery and corruption.

Mr. Praed, who has attained some reputation as an engineer, recently left England for Ponta Rica, where his activities excited the unfavourable attention of the authorities. On one occasion he completely disappeared for three days and on his return declined to furnish a satisfactory report of his movements. It is said that he also endeavoured to negotiate various property deals in suspicious circumstances. Acting on advice received from a vigilant member of his staff, Sir Francis Prothero, K.M.G., D.S.O., the Governor, signed an order for his deportation. Sir Francis and his daughter sailed two days ago from Ponta Rica on the Governor's yacht and are expected to arrive in England to-morrow night. Sir Francis's evidence is, of course, necessary in the case against Praed, but it is understood that he has

other important business to transact with the Colonial Office in regard to an estate development scheme which is at present under consideration.

I crammed the paper into my pocket and, picking up a taxi in the Mall, drove to Cadogan Gardens.

Marian was in the hall and she met me with both hands.

'Marshall and that fat, noisy old Ribault man are in the study, but I was determined to be first to greet you. Poor old boy, they have been giving you a junketing. I'm forbidden to attend lunch, but let's have a talk by ourselves when they've done with you. Marshall is bristling with ideas, so's the Honourable James Bronchitis. I told him he ought to be in bed instead of scattering germs among innocent people. Well, Nigel, say something. How's Philida?'

'A long way off.'

'Oh, rubbish! It isn't distance that separates people. But where's your luggage?'

'I should think somewhere in the Euston Road.'

'But you're staying here.'

I shook my head.

'I'll be furious,' said Marian, colouring.

'It can't be helped. Until I'm cleared of this charge I'm nobody's guest.'

'Nigel, if you think I'll stand for any of your obstinacy, you're wrong. Surely there are enough people for you to put out your chin at without including me.'

'Can't help it, Marian.'

'All right,' said she; 'then I hate you and I despise you, too. No man has a right to be self-contained where women or his friends are concerned. Especially when he's in trouble.'

I said:

'Sorry.'

‘What’s the good of being sorry? Don’t you realize that a man in trouble is our lawful prey?’

‘I realize,’ I said, ‘that in my present state I’m fit for no company but my own.’

‘And now you are behaving like an ingrowing toenail. What is your present state, anyhow?’

‘A state of inhibited vengeance. In other words, I’m like an old-fashioned muzzle-loader cram-jam-full of powder and nails but short of a percussion cap.’

Her hand went out and settled on my arm.

‘Poor dear! Let me lend you a percussion cap and you shall explode all your grievances in my private ear. That’s what private ears are for. Pent-up feelings are no good, Nigel. They make people old and hard and cracky at the joints.’ She broke off suddenly with, ‘Oh, dear! here come those tiresome men. Don’t forget I claim your confidence.’

Along a side passage came old James Ribault looking more Johnsonian than ever. His approach was heralded by a characteristic cough which set the pewter on an old Welsh dresser chattering in imitation.

‘Well, m’dear,’ he said, clapping me heartily on the back, ‘nice mess we all seem to have made of it. Though I don’t see how it was to be avoided.’

He seemed in excellent spirits.

‘You didn’t give the thing a chance, recalling me like that,’ I grumbled.

‘Chance! Rubbish! The old man refused to have any further dealings with you. You yourself advised sending some one else. Fond of you, m’dear, and all that — but it wasn’t a deal in sentiment. No room for sentiment where five million capital is involved. Still, we’re perfectly satisfied with what you’ve done.’

‘If that is meant as a rebuke ——’ I began.

‘Yah, yah, yah — don’t bark at me. Rebuke, cer-

tainly not. I mean it. You've rendered the firm first-rate service. Eh, Sir Marshall? — capital service — what! In fact, you've done exactly what I hoped you'd do. Though, of course, I didn't hope for as much.'

I was not in the mood for sarcasm, and I showed it.

'Get your hackles down,' said old Ribault. 'Don't start breathing through your nose. What the dooce d'ye think we sent you to the island for except to bring about a crisis of this kind? You don't imagine we sent you because of your wonderful reputation for tact.'

I looked at him in amazement.

'M'dear, I've known you upward of twelve years and I've about got your strength by now — or if I haven't I'm not fit for my job. Also I had a pretty shrewd idea of the kind of stuff His Obstinacy King Prothero the First is made of.'

'What's that got to do with it?' I asked.

James Ribault looked at me despairingly. His reply was oblique.

'Remember your return from Africa and young Palatine failing to turn up at the ship?'

'Of course.'

'I told him he wasn't to meet you; in fact I wrote that cheeky letter that was delivered to you.'

'I don't believe it — what for?'

'I wanted to satisfy myself you hadn't changed — that you still took yourself seriously. Finding you were just the same, I fixed you up to go to Ponta Rica.'

'All this,' I said wearily, 'may have a bearing on the case, but if it has I don't see it.'

'And it is so simple, too, m'dear. An ordinary representative would have been just brushed aside — but you were certain to make a stir — and kick up the mud. A man like Prothero meeting a man like you is morally certain to go out after his blood as he has done — as he

has done,' he repeated gleefully. 'Yes, yes, yes — thanks to your inflammatory personality we can begin to move.'

'Look here,' I said slowly, 'have you been using me as a trap for the old man to walk into?'

'Say rather a piece of red flannel for him to butt at. Rather sound, don't you think? The bull, confused and fatigued by the constant attacks on the red cloth, pauses and allows time for the steel to be driven home. You've been a very able matador, m'dear. I'd never ask for a better.'

It was just as well Marshall chose that moment to drive us through the dining-room door and get us separated by the width of a luncheon table. Even so I did not let the matter drop.

'It's a pity,' I said, 'if that was the opinion you had of me you didn't send some one else.'

'Not at all,' Ribault rejoined cheerfully. 'Opinion — very high opinion. But one chooses one's man on one's estimate of his abilities. One does not accept his estimate.'

He had found a feather somewhere and was amusing himself by blowing it in the air and by a series of well-regulated puffs keeping it hovering above his head like a miniature dove of peace.

'Then when you cabled me that negotiations were broken off ——?'

'Actually they are just beginning.'

Up went the feather to a higher plane.

'Am I to consider myself sacked?' I asked point-blank.

'Course you're sacked. But,' he added with a twinkle, 'as soon as Sir Marshall here has cleared you of that bribery charge, we'll have you on the strength again.'

'H'm!' I said shortly. 'I may not be so enthusiastic.'

The feather settled easily in his soup and was devoured unnoticed.

'You will,' he said between mouthfuls. 'We shall see.'

'Look here, Nigel,' said Marshall, 'don't be so damned disagreeable. I've wasted the whole morning dragging you out of a mess, and all you can do is grumble.'

'Fine!' said old Ribault splashily. 'Fine! Walk into him. Hey!' — to one of the servants — 'I'll have another plateful of this. I've a growing figure to take care of.'

'Do you mean,' I asked eagerly, 'that the prosecution will be withdrawn?'

'Technically it is withdrawn. I saw Bill Manistry this morning. The time of arrival on that cable proves your innocent intentions. Prothero quoted the exact hour and minute the parcel from you was delivered at Government House. The case is quashed by the clock. There is no case.'

'Then I'm free?'

'In a day or two. There are formalities, of course, and out of courtesy they'll wait till Prothero arrives.'

'By which time,' Ribault interpolated, 'we'll have the guns in and the ranges marked. Eh, Sir Marshall?'

Marshall held up a warning finger.

'Don't be in such a hurry. It isn't as simple as it looks. Before we go into committee let's have lunch without any shop. Then we can hear his story and then it'll be soon enough to line up our forces and see how they shape.'

The very excellent lunch Marian had provided smoothed away some of my ill humour. At any rate, it served as a temporary sedative — and helped me to tell my story in simple, coherent form. I told them

everything, only withholding information in regard to Prothero's letters.

With quick intuition Marshall guessed I was keeping something back, for once or twice I saw his left eyebrow twist upward in the form of a question mark.

'Seems odd,' he remarked poignantly, 'that fear of having to marry a tiresome woman would influence a man to that extent. In my opinion they must have a better card than that to scare him with.'

'Well, that's the story,' said I.

Old Ribault turned one of his twinkling eyes upon Marshall with a look of inquiry.

'Have we got a case?'

'A variety of cases — but I don't know that any is likely to succeed.'

Ribault pushed back his chair.

'As I see it,' he said expressively, 'it doesn't matter twopence if they succeed or fail. The main thing is we shall get a press — an enormous press — that no Government department could stand up against. The Colonial Office would be powerless to close with an offer from a firm which has as its chairman a man who has acted as Boas has acted. The justice and administration of Ponta Rica would stand exposed to the ridicule and contempt of the civilized world. Suppose for lack of evidence we don't prove our case — it 'ud hardly matter — we'd have started the hare. That shady group 'ud never come out of it white. Couldn't hope to. Suspicion clings — clings like a burr.'

'Thanks,' I said bitterly.

'Chut! We'll look after you all right. But what I'm getting at is this. A new Government like the present one — with its reputation still to make — won't dare to take risks. With the danger of an exposé on this scale they'll have to withdraw from the deal.'

'Some of that's true,' said Marshall, 'and some of it is mere hypothetical platform stuff. For my part I'd enjoy a dig at the Government. They dug us out of office and I don't owe 'em much in the way of gratitude. But from that point of view it 'ud serve my party better to let them close with the scheme first and attack 'em on it afterwards. You can't show up a Government by exposing its contemplations. Politically I'm for letting things run.'

For the first time Ribault looked glum.

'But that would mean we wreck. It is as a lawyer, not as a politician, we are seeking your counsel to-day,' he added. 'A confidence to a lawyer is privileged.'

Marshall laughed.

'Now as a lawyer ——'

'As a lawyer, Nigel has a second-rate case for malicious prosecution against Prothero and a rather better one against Boas for unlawfully sticking him in a dungeon. There you are.'

Ribault clapped his fat little hands together, and, stretching out a foot, kicked me heartily on the thigh.

'Hear what he says, m'dear?'

I nodded.

'That's settled, then, and we get busy straight away.'

I rose and walked to the fireplace, dispossessing Marshall, who was trying to set fire to his trousers by standing inside the club fender. Old Ribault was following me closely with his eyes.

At last —

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I can't consent to fall in with your plans.'

'Can't consent?' he repeated incredulously.

'No. What you suggest is, in effect, a personal attack upon a man who, for reasons of my own, I'm not in a position to attack.'

‘What reasons?’

‘Search your imagination,’ I replied, ‘and you’ll find the right answer.’

‘Yes; but, m’dear, a consideration of that kind can’t be allowed to ——’

‘I’m afraid it is no good arguing about it, Mr. Ribault. You indicated before lunch that in sizing me up and choosing me for this job you did so because I was a self-willed and obstinate ass.’

‘Chut — chut — chut! Nothing of the kind.’

‘Oh, yes! I don’t deny the accusation. In fact you can take my present refusal as evidence of its justice.’

Ribault’s face assumed a shade of hardness.

‘I shouldn’t have thought you were the man to take your treatment sitting down.’

I fired up at that.

‘It’s not a case of sitting — it’s a case of walking up and down — savage — angry — impotent like a beast behind bars. I’m sorry, for all my instincts are itching to smash that crew into small bits — but — but I can’t, and that’s all there is to it.’

‘Hardly,’ said James Ribault. ‘Hardly, m’dear. You forget that you are employed by the firm, and in honesty to the firm no other consideration but its welfare can be allowed to influence you.’

‘And you forget,’ I retorted, ‘that the firm has fired me, so I’m entitled to do as I like.’

Ribault looked at Marshall, who shook his head.

‘I’ve nothing to say,’ said he.

‘But I have,’ said James Ribault. ‘I have a lot to say. You, Praed, may elect to back out — well, do so. For my part I shall ask for an immediate interview with the Colonial Secretary, and repeat to him every detail of the story as you have told it to us.’

‘And then?’ I queried.

'Then, unless I am mistaken, you will be sent for to substantiate what I've said.'

He spoke like a man holding a pistol to another's head. It was an ultimatum and there was triumph in his voice.

'Mr. Ribault,' I answered slowly, 'I am very fond of you and I've a very great respect for you. But understand this: if you carry out that threat I shall have no hesitation in telling the Colonial Secretary that every word you have spoken is false.'

The old man looked at me and gasped.

'You'd never dare.'

'You know the way to find out whether I would or not.'

There was a pause — a silence — and Marshall broke out into a sharp, stinging laugh.

'*Impasse*,' said he.

Ribault poured out a glass of Madeira and drank it at a gulp.

'I like your spirit,' he said, 'but I'm not going to be broken by my own side. I'm not a vain man, but I've a streak of pride that forbids me to acknowledge defeat. Why, m'dear,' he addressed me with a sudden warmth, 'you understand that feeling. The same streak is in you with a younger heart than mine to pummel it through your arteries. Dash, daring, pluck to take chances — you have 'em all. You're not going to turn soft in a crisis like this. You're not going to ask me to believe a woman's love has made a coward of you.'

'Believe what you will,' I answered wearily. 'You've formed your opinion — no words of mine'll alter it. Put it down to funk — I don't care.'

In imagination I seemed to hear Philida saying, as she had said that evening on Atlantic Point:

'In some natures funking is a sign of grace.'

‘But Boas,’ Ribault pleaded. ‘Boas! Surely you want a tilt at him — you’ll not let him get away with it.’

‘If there is any way of attacking Boas that doesn’t involve Prothero I’d say go to it — but I can’t see the way.’

I looked at Marshall. ‘Can you?’

‘It’s doubtful,’ he acknowledged.

‘Very well, then. Count me out.’

And I turned my back on the pair of them and stared dismally into the fire. I did not hear Marian come into the room. The angry throbbing of blood — the drums of disappointment that beat in my ears — shut out ordinary sounds. My first consciousness of her was the touch of a hand on my sleeve.

‘Nigel — there’s a marconigram. I thought it might be important.’

I turned.

‘What?’

She held out the envelope to me.

‘Oh, thanks.’

‘Open it. I believe it’s splendid news.’

I broke the seal and read the few printed words — read and read them again.

It must have been the expression on my face that startled from Marian the quick:

‘Nigel — Nigel. What is it?’

‘Eh!’ I returned stupidly. ‘Eh! Oh, nothing much. Read it if you —’

She took it — read, then:

‘Oh, my dear — oh, no — oh, no!’

The message was very short.

It’s impossible, Nigel. Your freedom is more use than I am. Please forget me. I don’t want to be written to and don’t try to see me.

PHILIDA

5

I REMEMBER intercepting a glance between Ribault and Marshall when the substance of Philida's marconigram was conveyed to them. Plain as print the glance read, 'This should help.' A brief message of reassurance flashed from one man to the other — perfectly natural, having regard to what had gone before. The motive that had inspired my refusal was gone — dotted and dashed out of existence by a disinterested wireless operator. It was an example of the laws of self-preservation — of the instinct, common to the best as well as the worst of us, to seize a personal advantage before troubling to ask how it might affect the other fellow. In Ribault's position I have no doubt I should have felt the same, and that my first reaction would have been one of intense relief and satisfaction. Fate, in the character of changeling, emotions and a woman's instability, had played generously into his hands. To his credit, be it written, that satisfaction quickly gave place to sympathy. Gentle as a woman's his hand went round my shoulders and closed with tightening pressure. He was mumbling something more or less unintelligible about never having married and not regretting it.

Marshall was outspoken — that was his way — he spoke his mind irrespective of how welcome or unwelcome its conclusions might be. In moments of crisis — even when the crisis is not our own — true characteristics reveal themselves nakedly. Marshall did not believe there was more than one entirely perfect woman in the world — Marian. The rest were opportunists — vain, faithless, acquisitive, capricious, impulsive creatures — strangers to the sense of law and justice. They would make a man or break a man with equal lack of motive or regard. His estimate was not formed

from actual life but from courtroom experience — and an almost childlike belief that a sex which could not answer a direct question with a positive yes or no was unworthy of real trust or notice. Yes or no was Marshall's philosophy of life. He would not admit the existence of that vast area, peopled almost exclusively by women, which exists subtly between the affirmative and the negative state. He turned away when Marian whispered the news to him — his face spotted by greenish-white patches of indignation. Seizing the acorn of the blind pull, he struck it this way and that between open palms. I heard it chattering to and fro across the window-pane like a jazz drum.

'Damnable!' he ejaculated in a voice hard as a pebble. 'Utterly rotten and damnable! I'd thank God ——'

And quickly from Marian, with glittering eyes:

'Marshall — don't.'

I grabbed my hat from a chair in the hall and fled from the house.

After that I ran — Heaven knows why — ran across Sloane Street, through Lowndes Square, and so into the Park.

I did not hear footsteps pattering behind me — had not noticed that as I fled from the house Kenedy was approaching it. He must have thought me mad and turned to follow. Had I known, I should not have stopped. I felt I could never stop — that I must go on and on until muscle destroyed brain. I was running away from realization of a loss I dared not face. Yet even so I could not escape it. Realization gained on me and ever gained. Straining sinews and bursting lungs could not cheat it of its hold. Philida had gone — thrown me over — given me my freedom. Freedom to what? To sink into depths of desolation. Freedom

to the City of Despair. Our penny idyll was over — its minutes wasted and spent. That sweet bondage that to me was the greatest possession of life had been snapped, and she spoke of the frayed and broken cords as freedom. There are two moments in a man's life when he knows to the full all that a woman means to him — the first, when she gives her future into his keeping — the second, when she takes herself or is taken away. The moment of possession and the moment of loss. I do not know if I stumbled and fell, or whether I threw myself down on the grass. I lay oblivious of the wet earth and the cold rain driving against me — oblivious of everything but the agony in my heart. My world had become a cheap — a tawdry thing, empty of hope — a dead sea, sluggish and without wave or tide. All importances were gone — nothing mattered — I might do this or that, it did not matter. I might ask myself why, why, why — but the answer was of no account. The answer to all questions was the same — pain and emptiness and broken faith. I did not concern myself to seek a cause why this should have happened. The effect without explanation was enough. The effect and my suffering. In human suffering there is little inclination to examine the weapon with which the wound was inflicted. For one of a dozen reasons Philida might have acted. I was not curious. Reasons didn't matter — nothing mattered.

How long I lay there I do not know. Ages it seemed, although it may have been only a few minutes. Misery puts a brake on time. I was sopped to the skin when I rolled over on an elbow and blinked at the light.

Kenedy was standing a few paces away. He made a movement towards me when our eyes met.

'Hello!' I said with an attempt to conceal true feelings. 'That you? I must have been asleep, I think.'

Without a word he took off his own coat.

'Slip off your jacket, sir, and pop this on.'

'Why should I — no, I'm all right.'

'Slip it off, sir.'

The rain dripped from my jacket as I passed it to him. He had taken charge of the situation. I mumbled some nonsense about not having noticed it was raining.

'That's all right, sir; we'll get a taxi in the Lane.'

We passed out through the Park gates.

I hardly noticed the direction in which we drove, but there was something familiar about the house before which the taxi stopped.

'Your old quarters, sir, when you was on leaf in 'fourteen. Address 'appened to come to my mind.'

The door was opened by Mrs. Tiverton — red as a rose berry and as round. Her husband, whiskered and discreet, stood dimly in the background. Late cook and butler to one of the best families in the West country, they had retired into the respectable seclusion of an apartment house for single gentlemen. Many times I had put up in those comfortable quarters in Ebury Street, S.W., and nowhere was I so well looked after, so fathered and mothered, as by the Tivertons.

'Dear me! what a long time it is, sir! And I declare you haven't changed one bit. Your old front room's ready and there's a nice fire in the grate. This is a pleasure.'

And from Tiverton, doubting perhaps that his wife might talk too much — as cooks sometimes will:

'This way, sir, this way.'

It seems absurd to say that this bonny old couple, with their air of warmth and deferential welcome, were the cause of a burning in my throat.

The hall was narrow and my shoulder brushed against the ample outlines of Mrs. Tiverton as I passed

her by. I would gladly have put my arms round her neck and dropped my head on that warm billowy bosom. There are some old ladies who, by Nature's bounty, supply a sanctuary for the sick at heart. She was such a one — old enough to have outgrown emotions of her own — and old enough to absorb and to soothe the emotions of others. I can conceive such women stopped by strangers in the street and rested upon and held for the comfort they cannot choose but administer. By their very roundness they smooth away the angularities of youth. Angry sorrow, bumping against the warm cushions of their sympathy, loses much of sting and harshness.

With the same ceremony he had shown years before, when first I stayed with them, old Tiverton ushered me into my room, pausing a moment at the door that its splendours might not prove too overwhelming.

'Just the same, sir — as you see — just the same. You will take your meals at this table. Here's the couch, sir. Bedroom, as you remember, through that door — bathroom beyond. And a nice fire burning. Mrs. Tiverton will be putting on a kettle for a cup of tea.'

'Splendid, Tiverton, first-rate.'

'Thank you, sir. You'll find the armchair still very comfortable. Now if there's any single thing you fancy before I go down?'

I was expected to make a suggestion. I chose the first thing to come into my head.

'I don't think so — unless an evening paper.'

Tiverton became instantly grave.

'No, sir — there will be no papers in this house to-day — neither morning nor evening, sir. You'll pardon me, but I feel very strongly about that.'

I took his meaning and it touched me.

‘Nice of you,’ I said.

‘You’ll find the books on that shelf, sir, just the same ——’

Just the same — the words echoed in my brain as the door closed softly behind him. Happy contentment of age, clinging with pathetic affection to the spars of a constant level. Standing beyond and aside from the busy highroads of change, riding at anchor in a painted harbour where dust settled even on the ripples.

Whether it was genius or accident that persuaded Kenedy to seek for rooms in this old house I do not know — but I owed him more on that account than he or I would ever realize. In the utter despair which had fallen upon me, a despair pregnant with resentment and an angry desire that others should suffer as I was suffering, to drift into the calm serenity of this unchanging and unchanged atmosphere was like a cool hand on the brow of fever.

I cannot very well understand why this was so — or why the sorrowful likenesses of Queen Victoria and Albert the Good — the multi-mirrored overmantel with its forgotten but instantly remembered knickknacks — the white crocheted antimacassars on the formal horsehair furniture — the centre-pedestal walnut table with the Bible, the visitors’ book, and the pot of ferns — or, for that matter, the ministrations of a dim little man and a fat little woman should have influenced my mood one way or the other. But influence me they did. A man’s wretchedness is his own affair and of no moment in the world’s accountancy. Because of what had befallen me I had no title to greater regard — no justification for malice or change of standard. Because I had been hurt I had no right to smash a single one of those worthless knickknacks or disturb a single article of furniture from its accustomed place. I might

be hurt, but my obligations were the same in sorrow as in joy. I might not turn pirate because of my wounds.

I lay down on the horsehair couch and stared at the time-yellowed ceiling. A fly was crossing its expanse, slowly, the winter stiffness in his joints. In that great, inverted desert he was seeking a hiding-place to escape the chill hands of November; somewhere to die, or, if not to die, to find oblivion through the flowerless season until spring whispered life into his wings again.

His lonely errand and my own were much the same. The instinct of concealment was common to both. Matting time was over; nothing was left but to forget.

Forget! With that came the bitter realization of how little there was to remember. A few brief moments of pure joy which outshone all else that had gone before or ever could come after.

Philida and I had scarcely half a dozen meetings to look back upon. The hours we had spent together would not make up one full day — and yet in that little while she had so completely entered into me, and had created herself in such lasting form that her memory could never be obliterated. Her laugh — the boyish swing of her arm — clear thought and steady eyes. The purity and humour of her — her eagerness — love of the best — courage — those tight little compartments of her mind in which were distilled such quick understandings of all that was good to know.

Upon none of these could the dust of forgetfulness settle. They were of lasting stuff, untarnishable by time.

I covered my eyes with my hands, and the picture of her was before me — I took them away and it was still there. And so it would be, sleeping or waking.

I sprang to my feet and paced the room, and all the

time she was at my side mocking me with the freedom she had given.

My freedom, to do with as I willed.

6

KENEDY acted on his own authority in telling Marshall where I had hidden myself. For twenty-four hours he had been watching over me like a sheep-dog, and, what is wonderful, had hardly spoken a word. It is true he tried by gesture and facial contortions to get me to eat something. But somehow there seemed to be no point in eating. I had no need of food. Food is to stimulate the body and the mind for the work it must do. But neither my body nor mind had any work to do. I did not consciously refuse to eat. I had no inclination. I couldn't. Old Mr. Tiverton tried to prevail upon me until I begged to be left alone. Perhaps Kenedy and the Tivertons went into committee about me, which resulted in his errand to Cadogan Gardens. Marshall turned up at breakfast time of the second day.

We were entirely commonplace with one another.

His first remark was to ask me if I had seen the papers.

I told him:

'No — why?'

'Prothero's here — and his daughter, and Boas and Craven and Chalice — and that Nuñez-Hunter woman. There's a picture of them in the "Mirror." They got to town yesterday afternoon. That charge against you is withdrawn.'

'That in the papers, too?'

'Not yet. We had a meeting at the Director of Public Prosecutions in the evening. Bill Manistry gave Prothero the bird in no uncertain manner. "If I were Praed," he told him, "you wouldn't have heard the

last of this." He was suggesting, of course, a case for malicious prosecution.'

Marshall cocked an eye at me as to judge how I accepted the suggestion. I said nothing.

'Our friend Ribault is all for it, of course.'

'Naturally,' I grunted, 'and so are you, I suppose.'

'Not altogether — although the general run of military men will go out of their way to escape the kind of publicity that casts a doubt on the impartiality of their actions.'

'You can tell Ribault,' said I, 'that when I want to blackmail Prothero I have a better card up my sleeve than these legal intricacies.'

'Blackmail!' he repeated with a touch of anger. 'What the devil are you talking about?'

'Sorry, Marshall — but that's how it looked to me. After all, a threat of legal proceedings is much the same as a threat of private exposure. The object in both cases is to get a concession that otherwise one stands in the way of losing.'

'You forget giving the concession doesn't rest with Prothero alone. It must have the approval of the Public Trustee and the Colonial Secretary.'

'Yes — who'll both be influenced by the advice of the Custodian of ex-Enemy Property — who in this case is Francis Prothero.'

'Which is all the more reason why he should be attacked before he advises acceptance of the other offer.'

'I suppose so,' I answered wearily.

'Now look here, Nigel, you haven't a great deal to be grateful for as far as that man is concerned. He's done his damndest to wreck you every way he could. If ever a man had excuse for provocation —'

'Oh, provocation!' I repeated. 'To hell with provocation. What good will it do me to chuck the mud

about? The one thing I wanted has been taken away from me — am I to run mad and bite everybody because of that?’

‘Then you intend to drop out?’

‘Yes — no — I don’t know. But I don’t mean to play the skunk because my feelings are sore.’

‘That’s good enough — that’s decent,’ said Marshall. ‘But there’s this to be said. You can’t go against your own side to satisfy any private arrangement you may have made with yourself.’

‘And my own side can’t call the tune that I’m to dance to,’ I retorted.

‘So long as the tune follows the laws of music you can’t stop them.’

‘We shall see.’

‘Yes,’ said Marshall, ‘and we shall see very soon. There’s to be a meeting at the Colonial Office the day after to-morrow, which you are invited to attend.’

I stared.

‘Who’s done this?’

‘You could hardly expect Ribault to sit still.’

‘I shan’t support him,’ I said. ‘I warned you — warned you both — I shall deny ——’

‘You won’t deny anything — there’s nothing to deny. All that he has done is to offer a price for the land and terms. They are terms, too. The meeting I spoke of is for the discussion of those terms and the claims of the rival companies. You will be wanted as an expert witness. What’s wrong with that?’

‘And having got me there, I shall be interrogated in detail, questioned in such a way as to prove that Prothero has been acting with bias.’

‘Not necessarily. The answers you give will be your own affair.’

‘Just so, Marshall. But I know James Ribault. Do

you think he hasn't worked out my mental attitude to a hair? Of course he has. He knows well enough that when I find myself up against Boas and Prothero I shan't be able to prevent myself from letting out. He's relying on it — relying on me to pull Prothero off his perch and show up that bunch of crooks.'

'Well, perhaps he is,' Marshall admitted. 'And why not — and why the devil not?'

'Exactly,' I said. 'Why the devil shouldn't I?'

'I take it, then, you won't refuse to come — as a fact it's impossible for you to do so.'

'No, I shan't refuse, but tell Ribault not to expect too much. My evidence'll be based on the merits of the case.'

'Right,' said Marshall. 'We'll leave it at that. And now, you old poop, I'm going to send you off to Cadogan gardens for Marian to have a go at. You have been pickling here quite long enough. The car's at the door and I told your fellow to put your luggage abroad.'

I had no choice but to accept. I had promised, as soon as the charge against me was withdrawn, I would stay with them. It would have been an act of grace to have shown a little enthusiasm, for I was unlikely to prove a cheerful guest. That, however, was beyond me. Marshall took a taxi to his chambers, so I was alone in the car. But I did not go straight to Cadogan Gardens. I drove first to the Haymarket, where I collected a packet of letters from my bank.

It was queer at such a time, when my thoughts were entirely self-centred, that I should have remembered Marshall's youngsters. There was an old tradition when I stopped with them that the children should unpack my baggage, for I always put a few toys and things among the shirts to give a fillip to the job. It was an aim at popularity, I suppose. By a fluke it came

into my head as we were passing Hyde Park Corner. I told the chauffeur to stop at Hamley's. What I bought there I stowed into odd corners of my Gladstone. It gave me a queer satisfaction, which was increased when the children, three of them, gathering in the hall at the sound of my arrival, cast covetous eyes upon my belongings and made tentative inquiries as to whether they should conduct the unpacking.

'Rogers is a very bad unpacker,' said Mavis, 'most bad.'

'I'll leave it to you,' I said. 'If you happen to find anything — stick to it.'

A joyous procession went upstairs.

'That's more than divine,' said Marian, shaking her head from side to side. Then for the first time in her life she kissed me.

'Don't,' I said ungraciously. 'Please don't, Marian, dear.'

She looked at me closely, then nodded. She understood even though her feminine instinct resented the motive that drove me to bolt down my emotional safety valves.

'Poor Nigel,' she said. 'I see — I do see. But you won't be bitter, my dear? You won't let an injury turn you sour? Then, as I made no answer, 'There; I'll say no more and ask no more questions. We are going to have lunch together and then you shall take me to a *matinée*. After that I must spend an hour with the children and p'r'aps you'll help amuse them.'

Oh, strange, dishonest sex — who invalidate most sacred promises by the subtlest half-tones of expression. Marian kept and broke her promise by every word she spoke and look she gave. In the hours we spent together, though she clung desperately to the commonplace, speaking only of matters most trivial and remote,

yet never once was the inflexion of sympathy absent from her voice. She wrapped me round with a warm garment of compassion and friendship — treated me as I might have been a child — even to taking my arm when we crossed a road. To this day I do not fully understand what was her motive. She must have known the strain she put upon my emotional resistances. With women there is ever a set purpose and deliberation that governs their acts. Their most incomprehensible moods, contrary to belief, have little to do with accident. I think perhaps she may have been battling for the honour of her sex — seeking to prove by her own gentleness the value of woman's gentleness in this hard and hobnailed world. Herself a true woman, she could not bear hatred either of herself or of other women. The illusion of affection at all costs had to be preserved. At the back of her mind was a fear, no doubt, that because of what had befallen me I should turn away from women in distrust and bitterness. And so she fulfilled a duty to her sex and fought for it with tender determination and force that was irresistible.

And because the contrary nature of man will rather ask for than receive a favour, I kept myself wilfully aloof — neither accepting nor acknowledging the sympathy she offered. Had she been hard and cynical I might have acted otherwise and sought what then I declined. Barren complexes were at work that afternoon.

It was after five when we arrived home. Upstairs the children were laughing and shouting to one another. Marian said nothing, relying, no doubt, on those young voices' contribution to the work she had been at. Her silence was as expressive as a scored point.

Then:

'There are drinks in Marshall's study; go and have

one. Come upstairs if you're bored. Perhaps you'd better not, though. It's their shampoo night and they simply *will* fling soapsuds about.'

She left it at that.

I paused a moment in the hall, doubtful whether or not to follow. A yelling altercation burst out at Marian's arrival. Bedlam was let loose. No; I couldn't go — not yet. I lit a cigarette and opened the door of Marshall's study.

Standing with his back to the fire was Prothero.

7

OUR surprise was mutual.

I stopped in the doorway. The little man stiffened like a ramrod at the sight of me. By common consent we bowed to one another. I, ironically — he, with a stiff, formal nod of the head.

I said:

'I didn't know you were here, sir.'

'Nor I, that you were here.'

Under a frown, I saw his eyes settle on my cigarette as though I were guilty of an impertinence. It was typical of a man who never escaped a sense of his own superiority.

'Sir Marshall will not be in before seven. Can I give him a message?'

'No.'

I shrugged my shoulders and picked up the whiskey decanter.

'A drink, sir?'

'No, thank you.'

As I mixed myself a whiskey-and-soda my hand shook with an emotion I could not master. He noticed it with a hiss of intaken breath.

'No wonder — Mr. Praed — no wonder your hand shakes.'

I set down the glass.

'Is the object of your visit to tell me that?'

His reply was indirect.

'As you are smoking you will not object if I do likewise.'

'Please. I would offer you a cigar if I were not afraid my motives would be misunderstood.'

He took one of his long cigarillos from a breast pocket and lit it — staring at me over the match flame.

'Yes — yes,' he said. 'That was a mistake, eh — but by a narrow margin. Three quarters of an hour, to be precise. In the ordinary way I should offer you an apology, Mr. Praed, but I imagine you will be looking for something more lucrative.'

'Have you come to find out?' I asked.

'Not altogether. I came to see Sir Marshall, but you as a principal in the case will do as well. You intend to prosecute, of course — unless you have *other plans* in operation.'

'Sir Francis,' I said, 'the way I have been treated doesn't encourage me to take you into my confidence.'

'That is understood. On the other hand, I intend to take you into mine. What I have to say will not take very long. It is a statement of policy and opinion. There is to be a meeting at the Colonial Office to-morrow morning.'

'I am attending it.'

'Just so. At that meeting I shall support the estate development scheme of which Mr. Boas is the chairman. I shall support it because I believe it is basically sound and profitable.'

'The profits,' I said, 'are not disputed.'

'I shall support it,' he went on, his voice rising, 'with every ounce of weight and influence I possess. I shall support it, if need be, at the expense of my reputation and my position as Governor of Ponta Rica. There will be those present who may think my determination is to be shaken by pressure from outside — by fear of exposure. Listen carefully to what I say, for it may save you disappointment. No blackmailer is going to make me dance to his tune.'

'You say that to me, Sir Francis?'

'To you, yes — to you, you damned highwayman. I know what you've got — I know the use to which you mean to put it. Well, go ahead, put your letters on the table. I'll answer any charge that may arise from them in the proper place and time. Maybe I shall go under — you're welcome to any satisfaction that may bring to you. But first get this into your head and into the heads of your precious company as well — my mind is made up, and, come what may, I do not budge one inch from the decision at which I have arrived.'

As he spoke his body shook with passion like the flicker of a flame.

He was a man with his back against a wall and his chin out. He stood before me with hands gripping the muscles of his arms, with nostrils distended and the light of battle leaping from his eyes.

'Sir Francis,' I said, 'haven't you discovered a conscience rather late in the game? Is this decision formed from such upright motives that you can afford to make a parade of impartiality? I know well enough how your consent was obtained. You were flattered, coaxed — and finally frightened into giving it. You saw in the scheme a certainty of maintaining a doubtful hold upon the Governorship. Ponta Rica was un-

popular, its military value nil. The job wasn't worth the price the nation paid for it. And that's not all — you had something to hide. Something that syndicate knew all about.'

'It's a lie. No one knew but ——'

'But a woman whom, God knows, any man might have reason enough to avoid the tragedy of making his wife.'

'I decline to discuss my friends with a blackmailer.'

'Friends. She was a blackmailer herself, one of a syndicate of blackmailers. The whole thing from first to last is a conspiracy.'

'I tell you no one knew ——'

'Then how do you suppose I got the letters? I got them as a result of a talk I overheard between Boas and Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter.'

His eyes fixed me piercingly.

'I got them when I was locked up in the cellars of the old palazzo.'

'All lies. You stole them from her. I've her word for it.'

'Is the word of a blackmailer worth believing?'

'No, by God,' he replied with point.

'You won't believe I was locked in the old palazzo? Yet I could draw you a plan of those cellars one by one. You won't believe that I was drugged and dropped on a ledge of Amontado, or that when the wine-grower's wife screamed on the night of the ball at Government House it was a deliberate attack against me. I know you won't believe — and never would believe. That's why I have kept silent. I might still have kept silent if you hadn't taken a hand. You made your dislikes a trifle too conspicuous, Sir Francis. In your ambition to get the better of me you overran yourself. My reputation had to be broken, eh!

My — my future happiness — everything a man might treasure had to be taken away — that you might put through this glorious scheme that basically is so sound and profitable. It's a little late in the day, I repeat, to come whining here — hiding your funk under a barrage of boasts. They deceive nobody — me least of all. It's a great day for the British Colonies when they have men like you at the head of affairs!'

He did not say a word until I had finished speaking. A cold dignity had descended upon him. His face had assumed an expression at once watchful and impassive. In the silence that followed my outburst he fastened the single button of his coat with a sharp snap of the fingers.

'You have done?' he asked.

And I nodded.

'It's as well. The sentiments you have expressed doubtless would have been a credit to an honest man. You will be given an opportunity to repeat them at the Colonial Office to-morrow.' He passed a hand across his forehead as though attacked by sudden weariness. 'The case you have outlined against me is clear — very clear. Supported by what you possess it might prove overwhelming. We shall see. A man in my position has many large decisions to make, and sometimes his decisions may be wrong. I am not concerned with your good opinion of me, but for the good opinion I have of myself I say that to the best of my belief the recommendation I shall make to-morrow to the Public Trustee and the Secretary of State for the Colonies will be a wise and a just recommendation. You have chosen to declare that certain personal affairs of my own have unduly influenced me. That is a lie. There is no connexion between the one and the other. My private life and its difficulties are involved only to the

extent of your imagination. So far as affairs of State are concerned, this is the first time I have ever acted under duress.'

'Duress from whom?' I demanded.

'From you. What you will gain remains to be proved. You may think it is foolish of me not to come to terms.' His voice stiffened. 'I never come to terms. During the war, Mr. Praed, I was widely referred to as The Mule. I have known a mule refuse to move even though a fire was lit beneath him. To-morrow may provide you with a parallel. Good-night.'

'One moment,' I said. 'Do you believe Boas to be an honest man?'

'I believe him to be a man of the world, shrewd, practical, and trustworthy.'

'You mean that?'

'I do.'

I thought for a moment, and my hand went to my breast pocket.

'Would you trust him to the extent of giving him those letters that are in my possession?'

'They are not mine to give, Mr. Praed,' he answered slowly.

'Assuming they were — and assuming I gave you my word that he is a knave and a blackguard.'

'I would sooner trust them to him than their present owner.'

I took the packet from my pocket and held it out at the length of my arm.

'Take them, Sir Francis. They are no earthly use to me.'

He hesitated — eagerness came into his face — his fingers twitched nervously, then fastened round the letters.

'Look them through — I would like you to be sure they are in order.'

He broke the tape and examined them one by one, relief and perplexity passing in good waves across his features.

'I don't understand this — you — you give these to me — you! Why — why?'

'Why? Because if you'd been a younger man I should have made a fire of the damned things and held you over it. Why? Because it may prove to you that some of your precious estimates aren't worth the time you waste in coming to them. Finally, because it may convince you that if you were wrong about one man you can be wrong about another.'

Torn this way and that, he stared at me, then, turning suddenly, dropped the letters in the fire and held them down with the toe of his shoe.

'So you don't trust Boas to that extent?' I taunted. 'You take no chances, eh?'

He spun round and faced me.

'I'll not believe I'm wrong about you. This is a clever move, that's all — a move to win admiration for a sporting act. I warn you it won't succeed. My decision is made and I'll stick to it.'

'Run your head into a wall,' I said. 'I'm through with you.'

He went out with his hands clasped behind his back.

8

THE boy Budge slipped into Marshall's study and roused me from the reverie into which I had fallen — the boy Budge, whose holiday had been prolonged, thanks to a mild attack of German measles.

'I say,' he said, 'I say, it was frightfully decent of you to bring that along for me; but, my eye! it's pretty beastly. How did you know I had a projector? Dad only gave it to me last week. Did he tell you?'

I looked at the boy in doubt. He seemed to be talking rubbish.

'I suppose it's a bit out of some movie story, but if so, they are topping actors. It's awfully squirmy stuff. When our old friend marched on I was never more surprised. I suppose you got it off him. I never knew he was on the films.'

'What's all this, Budge?'

'That bit of film, of course.'

I sat up sharply.

'Film, what film?'

'In your Gladstone bag. Mavis rummaged it out when she was going through the lucky dip, and I thought you meant it for me. Didn't you?'

'No — not exactly. I'd forgotten I had it. I rather wish you hadn't seen it, old man. Did any of the others ——?'

'No, I was all alone. I say, where did you get the thing?'

'I found it in some old cellars that used to be a German headquarters during the war.'

The boy's eyes widened.

'But it isn't real — Lord, no! — that's a silly question, anyhow. Those chaps didn't shoot women — surely!'

Then, as I made no reply:

'I'd say, sir — if it's real — golly! but it couldn't be, because I'd swear that that officer chap was —— And the woman, too, she's exactly like ——'

'Like who, old man?'

'Florence Braid.'

'Budge, what makes you think that?'

'I've seen her statue in Parliament Square dozens of times. There's a picture of her, too, in a War book we've got. They shot her because she nursed an es-

caped prisoner. Mother has often read us the story, heaps of times, and how some Prussian captain ordered her execution and went along himself to see it done. Carl Haubenbauer. We tried to get him after the War, but the swine mizzled off.'

'You've got the facts all right,' I nodded.

'That's what makes me think the picture's a sham,' he said. 'It must be, or what's that beggar Boas doing in it?'

'Boas!' I exclaimed. 'Boas! In Heaven's name what are you talking about?'

'I'll take my oath — come and see for yourself. His face isn't one to forget in a hurry. And that kind of squirmy look in his eyes!'

I waited to hear no more.

'Upstairs, quick!' I said. 'Quick!'

We had reached the foot of the stairs as Marshall came through the front door.

'Hello, you seem in a hurry. What's the game?' he queried. 'Dodging me?'

Budge started to reply, but I waved him down.

'Marshall, come with us. This boy of yours — something impossible has happened ——'

'I want a drink.'

'Afterwards.'

I caught him by the arm and dragged him towards the staircase, protesting that if the top story was on fire we had better take a pail of water.

'It's serious,' I said.

The boy Budge led the way, three stairs at a time.

'Oh, Lord!' Marshall complained as the door of the little room closed behind us and his eye fell upon the projector, a miniature screen, and the apparatus for a cinema entertainment. 'This is a nice way to treat a tired man.'

The electric lights were snapped out. The picture of a wall was thrown upon the screen before us and the boy Budge began to turn.

Into the picture, with an armed guard on either side of her, walked a woman. Never had I seen such perfect tranquillity on any face. Not by the quiver of an eyelid was fear betrayed. One of the guards held out a bandage, but she waved it aside and stood with her back to the wall, head up and arms straight to her sides. One saw her lips move to the words, 'I am ready.' The guards moved away — the camera pivoted, and there was the firing party standing to attention with ordered arms, and there, a little apart, paring a finger-nail with a pocket-knife and smiling easily to himself, stood Leland Boas.

I heard a sharp intake of breath from Marshall and his fingers closed round my arm.

Boas dropped the knife into his pocket, straightened his body, and turned his head to the right. Slowly his brows came down and his eyes narrowed. That marksman's look!

And now the whole scene was before us — the small white figure in the nurse's uniform — the firing party — and Boas. I swear I could hear the order to fire ring across the stillness of the little room. Mist curled from the muzzles of the eight levelled rifles. The white figure swayed gently and settled upon the ground like melting wax. Dark rills crept from beneath it and trickled across the stones. The film ran out with a click and a rustle.

'God Almighty!' said Marshall, and switched on the light.

For my part I had no words. I do not think I was even conscious of exaltation. My enemy had been delivered into my hands, but, after what we had seen,

that was of small account. I remember looking across at the boy Budge, and shaking my head. His features were contorted in that singular expression of one who is repressing a disposition to cry. He was knocking his mouth with a shut fist as though forbidding an outlet to unruly emotions.

Then Marshall said:

‘I knew her, of course. She nursed me at Bloemfontein during the South African War. A woman who never gave in. Never. Let’s get a drink, shall we? — and — and ——’

He went out of the room very quickly.

9

I DID not sleep that night — a confusion of thoughts kept my mind in a state of restless activity. I lay on this side and on that — turned my pillow — tried to read — walked the floor, but all without success. Power to snap the cords of wakefulness was denied me. The traffic noises diminished into the low hum of a sleeping city, which in the darkness sounds like the sustained note of a violin. From the southeast came the regular chiming of Big Ben, supported and denied by lesser chimes. Below-stairs a small clock rattled out its faulty opinion of time with a note like a man tapping the rim of a wine-glass. The regular tread of a policeman on his beat came and went and came again. Dawn was heralded by snatches of song from a party of late revellers and the rumble of distant carts and lorries bound for the market at Covent Garden. An endless night, where sound and absence of sound contributed to the dull and wakeful misery.

Ribault, Marshall, and I had stayed talking until nearly two — ‘getting the guns in,’ as Ribault called it. Ribault, all lit up with enthusiasm — bristling

with plans of attack — chuckling his delight at the turn Fate had played in our favour.

‘There you are, m’dear,’ he had said a dozen times. ‘The whole thing switches from the Governor to the man we want to get at. It abolishes your objection, eh? Gives you freedom to strike at the root of the trouble.’

And Marshall, with his quick word — his logic — his lawyer mind. ‘This you can do. That you can’t. Here’s a point. Rubbish! Not like that.’ His love of drama and inventiveness.

Had it been otherwise with me, had it not been that every inspiration of joy and even of interest was gone, that talk and the making of those plans must have been one of the great hours of my life. I had had my fight — crossed my rivers and the end was in view — the end, but not the prize. Adventure and romance had been mine — mine for a little while, and then there was nothing.

Ever since the arrival of Philida’s marconigram I had striven against one appalling realization — the realization that in the hour when most I needed her she had thrown me down. In vain I told myself it was not so — that she had discovered, as any might discover, that the love she had professed was not of the stuff that lasts. The ugly truth remained. Her trust was not equal to the strain. She had not asked to hear my case — had forbidden even that I should write to her. That she would know by now that the charge against me was a false charge brought with it no joy. With its withdrawal she had sent no word of regret — or offered any remission of my freedom. Here was proof positive of how little she cared. So, at least, it seemed to me. Not that I would have had her write. I did not want an acknowledgment of mis-

take — for the Philida I loved and had created in imagination was the woman who trusted in adversity and stood her chance for better or for worse.

As Nancy had said after the adventure on Amon-tado:

‘Where my man went, I’d go too. If love’s worth taking it’s worth taking chances for.’

That endless night and the thought whirl!

Grumble of distant traffic — Philida — clocks chiming — Philida — her name went to the measure of the chimes. A woman lying dead beside a wall. She went bravely all the way. Reasonings and searching for reasons. ‘We’ll say this and we’ll say that.’ Old Ribault rubbing his hands. Somewhere about the house children sleeping peaceful, blue sleep. Was Philida sleeping? Her kisses had been mine. Was that the extent of her loss? The boy Budge beating his knuckles against his mouth. Philida. And now the policeman again — passing. A man of forty in love and losing in the game. Stick to business — there’s a surer profit. Stiffen up for that last round, Nigel Praed. Time the knock-out. Some satisfaction in winning a fight of this size. Heel on neck, Leland Boas — Carl Haupenbauer. Marshall, with the Haupenbauer dossier at his finger-tips. Even in Prussia his reputation had not been tolerated. Five hundred thousand marks intended for Turkey went with him into the unknown. Clever idea to lose one’s identity in an African jungle and adopt another man’s. Philida and that man. Thank God that danger would — Dawn at last — pale lemon creeping into the grey — the outline of chimney-stacks, and against a scud of clouds the black silhouette of a cat, arching his back upon the ridge-pole of a roof.

Perhaps the door was open, for I did not hear Mar-

shall come into the room. He stood a moment beside the bed, looking down at a soap-dish half full of cigarette ends.

‘Like that, is it? Are you man enough for a swim in the Serpentine?’

Heaven be praised for the man who has no sentiment! He makes up for it by understandings of another kind.

10

JAMES RIBAULT and I walked to the Colonial Office. Marshall had started ahead of us, having arrangements to which he wished personally to attend.

Ribault did not talk much, but he hummed a great deal to himself, and once or twice executed a dance step upon the pavement. As we were early, a halt was called at a confectioner’s in Buckingham Palace Road. Here, greatly to my astonishment, the old man consumed an incredible number of cream buns, doughnuts, and French pastries.

These he severally referred to as ‘Capital,’ ‘First-rate,’ and ‘Delicious.’ His behaviour was that of a schoolboy out for a bust. Instead of making him sick, these rich confections added surprisingly to his air of general well-being. He came out of the shop covered with crumbs and smiles.

‘Food and a fight, m’dear,’ said he. ‘They are the things that make life tolerable.’

With that, he put on an immense cigar, gave half a crown to an urchin, and, taking my arm, set off at a good pace.

We arrived at the Colonial Office one minute ahead of our appointment.

In the hall we found Mr. Zealer waiting for us.

Zealer was the antithesis of Ribault. Whereas Ribault was like a huge india-rubber ball, Zealer was like a thin bar of spring steel slightly rusted from exposure. A chronic sufferer from dyspepsia, he subsisted mainly upon hot water and plasmon biscuits. I cannot recall an occasion when he uttered a remark in my presence. He expressed his opinions almost entirely by gestures of the head and the two sounds, 'Yssss' and 'Nnnn.' He shook hands with me in silence, a sharp pressure and release, like getting one's fingers in and out of a mole-trap. We were conducted upstairs and down a corridor by an official. Thence we passed through a large ante-room to a smaller apartment beyond. In the ante-room were Chalice and Craven. Chalice sprang to his feet as I came in, but, responding to a touch from Craven, sat down with an air of embarrassment.

There were quite a number of men in the room, some of whom were strangers to me. I recognized Bryan Lewis, the Public Trustee, from pictures I had seen of him in illustrated papers, a sharp-featured man with very long fingers. To my astonishment, Sir William Manistry, the Public Prosecutor, was present. He nodded a greeting to me. I did not at first see Boas or Prothero. The latter was sitting at the big table, restlessly flicking a corner of his moustache with a thumb-nail. He rose, bowed stiffly, and sat down again.

Boas was leaning against a wall talking to two other men, one of whom I learnt was his solicitor. Standing inside the grate, with hands buried in his pockets, was Marshall. I could distinctly smell the scorching cloth of his trousers. A faultlessly dressed young man bustled through a second door and announced that the Secretary of State would not keep us waiting a

minute. By tacit consent the rival companies gathered at opposite sides of the table.

‘Gentlemen, please,’ said the faultless young man.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies, several permanent officials, and an under-secretary came in. Lord Medhurst was typical of the successful politician. He was at once affable and precise. He knew his own mind, but did not always reveal it. He was a good listener, and conveyed the impression that other men’s opinions might well prove as valuable as his own. After the formality of introduction he took his place at the head of the table, invited us to be seated, and launched into the subject.

‘I have,’ he said, ‘adopted an unusual course in inviting a general discussion upon a matter which in the ordinary way would be decided, without the introduction of outside influences, by this Office, my friend the Public Trustee, and the Custodian of ex-Enemy Property.’ Here he inclined his head towards Prothero. ‘In ordinary circumstances the recommendations of Sir Francis in matters dealing with the welfare of Ponta Rica would be sufficient to ensure our approval. Unhappily, the present circumstances are not ordinary. They are not ordinary on two accounts. First, because by adopting the Estate Development Scheme which is before us, we are reluctantly driven to reject the proposals of Messrs. Ribault, Zealer & Palatine for the construction of an aërodrome intended as a fuel port for the British-American Airway, Limited. I have no hesitation in saying, gentlemen, that both these schemes have the approval of the present Government, whose ambitions, as you are all aware, are progressive. Were it geographically possible for both schemes to be made operative, there is no question that both would receive our support and encourage-

ment. It is an unhappy accident of nature that this is not the case. Just as there is only one site upon which a new town can be built — there is only one site suitable for the construction of an aërodrome. We are, therefore, forced to decide one way or the other. Now, gentlemen, it is an open secret that the finances of this country, still heavily burdened with war debts, are in no position to float loans for the carrying-out of expensive enterprises. Our policy in absorbing *Ponta Rica* into the Empire is one that has been severely criticized. We should never obtain the consent of the taxpayer for costly experiments to develop the island. Its development, therefore, is a matter of private rather than of public enterprise. The Government is in the position of a ground landlord who, although not financing the operations which are to take place upon his property, retains to himself the right of rejecting or approving the plans. Sir Francis Prothero, in the dual character of Governor and Custodian of ex-Enemy Property at *Ponta Rica*, is of the opinion that we could not do better than accept the proposals made by Mr. Leland Boas on behalf of his syndicate. That opinion not only has my own support, but the support of many of my colleagues in the Cabinet. It is, I think, generally known that with the introduction of the new Gaming Act, public gaming will be granted under licence in certain specified localities. *Ponta Rica*, on account of its isolated position, its general beauty, and favourable climate, would indubitably be one of the privileged places. I have to thank Mr. Boas for the figures he has prepared of profits that might be expected to accrue from a properly run and organized casino. His estimate is singularly free from exaggeration or optimism. The scheme as represented to us affords a new and important source of revenue.'

It was here that Marshall yawned — openly, audibly, and without an effort at concealment. He had tilted back his chair, and his feet were propped against the table in the approved Parliamentary style.

He yawned, and the permanent officials gasped. Lord Medhurst stopped abruptly, frowned, and cleared his throat. James Ribault, startled from a reverie into which he had been cast by this long stream of velvet words, released the most crashing cough in the whole of his bronchial history. It swept the room like the bursting of a hand grenade. A heap of paper slips before him were blown this way and that. The whole atmosphere was changed, for whereas before the company had been lulled into a kind of casual insensibility, now every one was alert and on guard, chairs were drawn up to the table or noisily pushed back. Noses were blown, and Prothero rubbed his lean hands together with a dry rustle.

‘I am afraid,’ said Lord Medhurst crisply, ‘I am occupying a great deal of your time in my analysis of the situation. I shall be as brief as possible in what remains to be said. The Prime Minister has instructed me, before coming to an agreement with Mr. Leland Boas, to offer to Messrs. Ribault, Zealer & Palatine the opportunity of ventilating any grievances they may feel they have sustained. As a result of an act inspired, as no one will doubt, by a most zealous regard for duty on the part of Sir Francis, an unfortunate incident has occurred to which has been given a most unwelcome publicity. I refer to the arrest of Mr. Nigel Praed in circumstances which a less broad-minded and experienced man might assume to be the result of deliberate prejudice. I venture to hope an acceptable apology for this regrettable occurrence is now in preparation, and will be published in all newspapers concurrently with

the withdrawal of the charge. In saying I trust the apology will be acceptable, I feel I should add that were it to prove otherwise, Mr. Praed would be in a position to embarrass greatly our present negotiations and cast a slur upon the reputation of a very gallant officer and gentleman. I am not making suggestions to Mr. Praed or to the firm in whose service he was employed. I am not disguising the fact that if they choose to resort to the law or the press they would excite in the imaginations of a vast number of their fellow countrymen contempt and ridicule for the persons and departments responsible for this unwilling miscarriage of justice. It is through exposures of such a kind Government prestige is sacrificed. Mr. Praed and Mr. Ribault and my learned friend Sir Marshall Livesay are, I am certain, well aware that, whatever appearances may suggest, there was no thought of malice in the prosecution. I am confident these gentlemen, in the face of what must be an hour of disappointment, will state that their own future conduct will be equally without malice or desire to precipitate a national scandal. No one deplures what has happened more than I and no one is more anxious that amends should be made.'

He paused, and looked at me with an expression of innocent interrogation.

Marshall caught my eye and nodded.

'Go on,' he said.

As I rose to speak, I saw Prothero stiffen in his chair.

'If you will forgive me, my lord,' I said, 'I think you are concentrating on a difficulty that has not arisen.'

Somebody, I don't know who, ejaculated:

'Eh?'

'I have no grievance against Sir Francis Prothero. He did not approve of the proposals it was my duty to

place before him, and he said so. He further said he had given his approval to the other scheme. Everything was perfectly plain and above-board. He gave me a hearing. I failed to convince him and that is all there was to it. In ordering my deportation from Ponta Rica he acted on advice from his A.D.C., who had seen me in Germany during the War, and quite naturally was unaware of my true identity. Sir Francis believed me to be an alien with an unsavoury reputation, and took the precaution to have me removed. It is true in so doing he may have acted with more force than judgment, but his motives were above reproach. I confess I felt some bitterness when arrested on a charge of bribery, but I fully realize that, when the charge against me was preferred, His Excellency was unaware that I had received a cable from my firm — dispensing with my services. My treatment throughout has been distinguished by the most exact justice.'

Lord Medhurst beamed.

'I cannot conceive a more generous attitude of mind,' he said, 'and I am sure Sir Francis will hasten to second that opinion.'

There was a pause in which Sir Francis drummed his fingers upon the table. His mouth was tightly compressed and his brows knit.

'I am wondering,' he said, in a voice crisp as a sheet of ice, 'whether Mr. Praed, in voicing praises of my impartiality, is himself acting with equal impartiality?'

'Ah! Tut! Come!' Lord Medhurst hastily interposed. 'Isn't that rather beside the point?'

'It may be, my lord, but as in my previous dealings with Mr. Praed he has always repressed his admiration for my acts and motives, I am asking myself to what this altered attitude is to be attributed? When a

man falls to flattery, he is generally hoping to get something out of it.'

'Isn't flattery an awkward word in this relation?' said Marshall. 'Awkward since it implies exaggerated praise for an inadequate cause.'

'I am not concerned with definitions, Sir Marshall.'

'Precisely,' from Lord Medhurst. 'Nor are we concerned, Sir Francis, with personal animosities. Mr. Praed has made a graceful tribute which I had thought you would be the first to appreciate. We are all anxious to find a way out of this very uncomfortable dilemma. Mr. Praed, as the aggrieved party, has a right to express himself in what terms he thinks fit. I for one am satisfied that there was no irony in the phrases he used.'

Sir Francis folded his arms.

'I ask him to endorse that,' said he. 'I ask him to deny that he wants something and believes he has a chance of getting it. Further, I suggest that what he wants is to put me in a position of public odium.'

'Sir Francis ——'

'Let me answer that, Lord Medhurst,' said I. 'Sir Francis is perfectly right. I do want something.'

'Ha!'

'But not what he suggests. Indeed, I wish to rescue him from what inevitably will result in public odium if his recommendations in the matter of the Estate Development Scheme are adopted.'

Lord Medhurst looked at me severely.

'That, Mr. Praed, is outside your province.'

'It is within the province of any British citizen,' I replied, 'to render what service he can to the State. I think Mr. Boas will agree that he is hardly the kind of person with whom a reputable Government could have dealings.'

'And so the mud begins to fly,' said Boas. 'I warned you, my lord, to expect something of the kind.'

Lord Medhurst held up a hand.

'What is the idea of this?' he demanded. 'Surely you must realize that abuses of this kind are not to be tolerated?'

'My lord,' said I, 'I have abused no one. What I said is a plain statement of fact. Except with a rope the British Government cannot deal with the murderer of Florence Braid.'

'It's a lie!' The words shrieked out like a steam whistle. Boas was on his feet, straining across the table towards me.

'Carl Haubenbauer is this gentleman's name, my lord. In an adjoining room, which has been prepared for the purpose, is a section of film from a German Official War Series showing the execution of Florence Braid and those involved in it. By good fortune it came into my hands when, thanks to this man's agency, I was confined in the cellars of an old palace at Ponta Rica.'

Seizing my coat from behind, Marshall jerked me back so suddenly that I lost my balance and fell full length. As I fell, two shots cracked out in rapid succession. The great mirror over the mantelpiece split into fragments and showered on to the grate like rain. From the far side of the table came a shout and another shot. One of the permanent officials staggered back against the wall, a hand pressed to his thigh, his face twisted, and a repeated 'Oo-oo' coming from his lips. By then I was on my feet again. Prothero had a hand at Boas's throat and was fighting for possession of the pistol. It was a struggle between an ant and a wasp. Somehow, Marshall had reached the other side of the room. My way to right and left was blocked by men

and overturned chairs. I went for it head first across the table. A bullet splashed into the woodwork beside my hand. I swivelled off the surface as Boas flung Prothero away with a foot in the stomach. His falling body tripped me, and I stumbled headlong into the muzzle of the pistol.

'Ah,' came from Boas, and I knew my number was up. But before the crooked trigger finger had taken the first pressure, Marshall struck. He struck with something black — a round ebony ruler. He struck, and the weapon sank in like a hot knife into wax. The man that Bill Manistry, leaping in and collaring low, brought to the ground, was dead before ever he reached it. He lay with a darkening groove across his forehead and the pallor of death creeping over his features. The pistol was still clasped in his hand, and his glazing eyes, half obscured by fallen lids, seemed to be finding the range of eternity.

II

It was a very different atmosphere when, ten minutes later, we gathered in another room to talk in excited whispers of what had happened. The formal Board-Room manner had been knocked out of existence by four revolver shots and an ebony ruler. There had been some difficulty to decide what to do with the body, for there is no private mortuary in a Government office. An old charwoman, who at the time of the affray was washing the stone stairs outside the door, offered the practical suggestion that it should be put in the little room where she kept the brooms and pails.

'There's a nice table there,' she informed us, 'and I'll pop a sheet over it till the police comes along.'

The suggestion was adopted. Nobody else wanted

it. Bill Manistry, after his spectacular 'collar,' got on the telephone to Scotland Yard.

It was the Secretary of State's private room to which we had repaired. Francis Prothero was given a chair by one of the windows, where he sat with hands hugged over his stomach, a drawn face and lips tightly shut. He must have been suffering acutely from the kick Boas had given him. He made no complaint, however. In the general excitement it was some while before I noticed that Lord Medhurst was continually dabbing at me with a folded sheet of blotting-paper.

'I'm afraid it's done for — quite done for,' he kept murmuring.

'What is?' I asked.

'Your suit.'

I saw then that I was covered with ink from head to foot.

I had not seen Lord Medhurst pick up the huge lead inkwell and fling it at my assailant.

'A miserable shot, too,' he complained. 'Nowhere near.'

Marshall and Manistry were in a heated argument as to which of them was responsible for Boas's death.

'I tell you I smashed his skull with the ruler.'

'Well, you see if at the post mortem they don't find his back's broken. I heard it snap as we came down together.'

James Ribault was lighting a cigar, an example readily followed by others. Very soon the room was blue with smoke. With some diffidence I offered a cigarette to Prothero. He shook his head. The same distrustful look was in his eyes when they met mine.

'Heavy scoring, Praed,' he said, forming the words with difficulty. 'I take it this card was up your sleeve

last night when you generously presented me with the rest of the pack?’

‘Until after you left I was not aware of its existence,’ I said, and turned away with a gesture of disgust.

But he recalled me with:

‘Come back. I—I beg your pardon. I am not a man who readily admits himself to have been wrong. Nor readily admits himself a loser.’

‘Nor am I, Sir Francis.’

‘You fought chivalrously and against heavy odds.’

‘I had retired from the fight,’ I said. ‘It was only an accident brought me back.’

‘Retired?’ One of his eyebrows went up questioningly.

‘You might have guessed that last night.’

‘I was looking for something at the back of it.’

‘You couldn’t have looked far.’

‘My daughter?’ he queried.

‘It was difficult to attack you, in the circumstances.’

‘But she’d given you the chuck, Praed. You were free to do what you liked.’

‘I did what I liked,’ I answered.

For a long while he looked at me. There was something queerly naïve in his expression. Presently, as though it were acting independently of instructions from headquarters, his right hand jerked out towards me.

‘Care to?’

I took his hand with an awkward laugh. We were both horribly embarrassed.

‘Don’t imagine I enjoyed that,’ he said. ‘I hate to lose a good antagonist.’

‘If you never lose anything better worth having ——’ I began, and left the sentence unfinished.

Boas’s lawyer was speaking. He was very full of ges-

ture and protestation. He had no idea of the identity of his client — always believed him to be a British subject of great integrity. It was impossible to credit that he was the murderer of Florence Braid. There must have been a mistake.

‘Did his conduct suggest a man who had been unjustly accused?’ Marshall asked sweetly.

‘On behalf of other shareholders in the proposed company, there will have to be an inquiry — a most searching inquiry.’

‘Don’t doubt it. There will be,’ said Manistry, short and crisp.

‘Of course, in the present circumstances,’ the lawyer persisted, ‘it is doubtful whether our plans will mature. Mr. Boas was the force of the whole machine. He practically controlled the entire capital. The scheme had been registered as a limited liability company to protect his personal interests. I am afraid it will be some time before I shall be able to make any definite proposals.’

‘I think you may take it, sir,’ Lord Medhurst interrupted, ‘you will not be required to make proposals, definite or otherwise. You may further take it that negotiations are at an end. Good-morning.’

He turned his back and shook me warmly by the hand.

‘We are certainly indebted to you, Mr. Praed, for rescuing us from a disastrous mistake — most disastrous — a mistake the extent of which can barely be realized. We have been badly advised in this matter ——’ He screwed in an eyeglass and focused it upon Prothero. ‘There has been a precipitancy greatly to be deplored.’

Then Prothero, on his feet and to attention, quickened by finding a new antagonist, red, bristling, prawn-like.

‘I would remind you, my lord, that the man was sent to me with an introduction from your predecessor in this office. If there is any doubt in your mind as to my conduct of this business, I shall be happy to tender my ——’

‘Ah! Tut! Come! No, no. But in the circumstances I feel that perhaps a rather less arbitrary attitude might be adopted towards these other gentlemen.’ His gesture travelled towards Ribault and Zealer in a distant corner of the room.

Francis Prothero nodded.

‘In the circumstances,’ he repeated, ‘my objection to their proposals may be taken as — as withdrawn.’

It is strange with what little enthusiasm I heard these words. My object had been reached. Prothero’s consent had been given. It mattered little to me after that whether or no the scheme went through. I had small doubt that go through it would, after the paraphernalia of Cabinet meetings, angry questions in the House inspired by shipowners, claims by rival aërial navigation companies, criticism and argument in the daily press, and great stacks of official correspondence. Yes, it would go through — borne on the wings of chance. Because I had fallen in love and scrambled over the dustbins in Gerrard Street, and been flung into the cellars of an old Moorish palace, and slithered down the side of a mountain and fought a man at Atlantic Point, and appeared in the dock at Bow Street, and had had my heart broken into many pieces, the throb of mighty engines would be heard and stout English and American business men, sucking fat cigars and studying the latest market quotations, would fly at ease high above the restless waters of the Atlantic.

Old Ribault slipped an arm round my neck, and with a fat hand smacked me affectionately upon the cheek.

'Wasn't I right, m'dear, when I picked you for the job? You're the best friend this firm's ever boasted. What's it going to be? House in Curzon Street — shooting-box — grouse moor in the Highlands — salmon river in Norway? You've opened the door to any or all of 'em. You've only to choose.'

'None,' I replied, with a touch of bitterness, 'but if there's a job going in the Congo wanting a man who's used to the work and who likes the climate, let me know.'

I escaped from the room alone.

12

THERE was nothing to keep me in England, and but for Marshall I should have left London that night.

'Can't be done,' he said. 'Your evidence is bound to be wanted at the inquest. Do what you like after that.'

He was right. I was subpoenaed during the late afternoon.

I had the jumps — couldn't stop still. To occupy a chair, even at meals, was agony. My job was over, and the lack of occupation was more than I could bear. There was nothing to think about — to look forward to. Guided by a divine spirit of friendship, Marian violently quarrelled with Marshall all through dinner that night. She was trying to prove, I suppose, what a villainous institution marriage is.

Marshall rather destroyed any effect she might have produced by petting one of her hands. He dropped a remark to the effect that Mrs. Nuñez-Hunter had left for the Continent by the afternoon boat train. Ordinarily that would have stirred my interest, but somehow it failed to do so.

After dinner they suggested doing a show, but I drew the line at that. Muttering something incoherent, I went out. The telephone bell was ringing as I shut the front door behind me. With no set purpose in my mind, I walked round and round Cadogan Square — dozens of times. A taxi-driver, whose cab was waiting on the stand, asked if it was for a bet. He seemed a decent fellow, and although I hardly knew why, I stayed talking to him. We talked as strangers will, with lack of reserve, rewarding each other for the companionship gained with straightforward statement and confession. He told me his difficulties and his aspirations, how many children he had and of the diversity of ways in which his wife had helped him.

‘Ah! but they’re queer — women,’ he said. ‘Lumme, they *are* queer. Thinkin’, thinkin’ all the time. And do we give ’em credit for it? It’s a fact we don’t. Mind you, I don’t say as a man’s to blame in that — ’e ’as his work to do and ’is ’ands full — not much wonder if sometimes ’e don’t follow ’er reasonin’s. I’m goin’ to tell you som’ing. Was a time when I was mad for the chance to break my old woman’s neck. Now, then! It’s a fac’. I reckoned she’d played me up, d’yer see — reckoned she was no good. And why? Solely ’cos I ’adn’t the brain to follow ’er reasonin’s. ’Appened this way — a few munce before our first come along — and me out o’ work and worryin’. Lumme! I ’adn’t the ’eart to look for a job — jest ’angin’ round starin’ at ’er — not bein’ able to leave the ’ouse, if you understand me — wasn’t enough food for one, let alone two. Fair breakin’ m’ backbone with the worry of it, I was. Then one day I ’appens to be out for a hour and when I comes back she’s gorn. That’s right, sir. Clean gorn without a word. Best part of a year afore I sees

'er again. I'd a job then with the London General. Good pay and reg'lar. Was 'avin' my tea when she walks in — the kid wrapped up in a shawl. Young Alf — that is. Reckon that's what saved 'er — the kid — for I'd got to my feet with my 'ands shut.

“Well, George,” sez she, “you’ve come through all right.” And “No thanks to you,” sez I. She jest shakes 'er 'ead. “You’d never 'ave done it with me on yer 'ands,” she sez. Then kind o’ disappointed: “Ain’t you got no imagination, George?” I’m tellin’ you the Gospel truth, sir. Bin out to face it alone, she 'ad, with a kid comin’, so’s to give me a chance. That’s the woman whose neck I wanted to break. There’s a woman for yer. Ever sat down and cried? Lumme! I did, and 'er 'and strokin’ the back o’ my neck. When I was able to, you know, “Lizzie,” I sez, “if you was to know the things as I’ve thought about you,” and she ups and answers, smilin’ like, “’S all right, old man — you wasn’t supposed to understand.”’

He broke off short and stared at me.

‘Good 'eavens! what’s the matter, sir?’

I was gripping the railings, shaking, from head to foot, and mumbling:

‘Why did you tell me that story? What’s the idea? In God’s name, man!’

He slipped an arm through mine.

‘Set down in the cab for a bit. You ain’t well. You’re all of a tremble, sir.’

‘I’m all right, only — only ——’

‘You do as I say.’

He piloted me through the open door and plumped me down on the cushions.

‘That’s more like. Rest your 'ead back while I slip down the road for a drop o’ brandy.’

'Wait!' I said, and gripped him by the wrist. 'Look here, drive me to Brown's Hotel.'

'You much better ——'

'Go on, man — do it — do it.'

Shaking his head, he cranked up and got into the driver's seat.

Of that journey all I remember is successive waves of hope and fear.

At the bureau I asked for Philida.

'She went out half an hour ago, sir,' said the clerk.

'Do you know where?'

'No, sir.'

'Or when she will be back?'

'No, sir.'

'I'll wait,' I said.

But I couldn't wait. Five minutes convinced me of that. I went out without leaving my name.

'Back again,' I said to the taxi-driver. I stumbled out where first we met.

'I'd get home, sir,' he said. 'Straight, I would.'

There was no question of a fare — I'd forgotten it, and he did not remind me.

We drifted apart.

As I came opposite the house in Cadogan Gardens the front door opened. Marian was letting some one out. She saw me, I am certain of that, for I was at the foot of the steps. She saw me and shut the door quickly, leaving the some one outside. It was very dark — the nearest street lamp was fifty yards away. The porch was in deep shadow. Very softly a voice said:

'Nigel.'

I went up towards the goal of two white hands that drew me back into the shadow. I tried to speak, but

no sound came. The white hands were about my neck — a wet cheek was crushed against mine. All that was worth having in the world was in my arms.

13

How incurious is the state of happiness! I had thought that if ever Philida and I met again we should meet in a parliament of question and answer, a court of inquiry where not even the lightest pebble of those heavy stones that had burdened us would be left unturned. So much called for justification — so little for acceptance. Yet her two hands groping out of darkness and finding mine answered all questions — swept away doubt, smoothed and soothed and comforted. So without a spoken word, utterly content, her arm locked in mine, we crept away through the empty echoing square to where the taxi waited on the cobble stand.

I have no memory of telling the driver where to go. There was no need — our destination had been reached — location was of no account — she and I were together. I remember how I gave him a thump on the back and how he replied with a grip of his oily hand, and how Philida accepted him as part of the machinery of our happiness, and how we all made idiotic and friendly noises to each other, in which the engine rhythmically joined. After that, happy and huddled, we drove — where? I don't know — to paradise, perhaps, or maybe it was just Hampstead Heath, which is paradise enough for lovers of any station. I remember a church clock chiming an hour that must have been very small, and for the shortness of which I can vouch. I remember streets and terraces that dwindled into houses standing among trees and open spaces, and presently no houses, but only trees and

open spaces, and a sense of height and little lights glimmering in a great black hollow beneath as gold dust sparkles in the dark pool of a river. There was water, too, with a streak of moon across its surface and the shadow of a pine. It may be we invented the nightingale that each one of us claimed to hear — it was not the season for nightingales to sing. But the owl was real that flapped whitely into the glow of our lamps, hovered, laughed, and vanished. It was, perhaps, his hoot of reedy laughter that tossed a measure of sense into the silence we shared, startled us to a sudden wakefulness of mind and need of words.

And Philida said:

‘One doesn’t know the bare meaning of happiness until one has crossed the rivers.’

‘There’s something finer, better, more complete in what you give me, Philida, to need contrast or barrier to set its price.’

‘Ah, now!’ she said, and smiled. ‘Now, perhaps. Did you ever ask yourself what it cost me to give you your freedom?’

I shook my head.

‘How could you believe it was ever freedom?’

‘It was freedom — and that was the best thing I could give you.’

‘If you could only have known,’ I answered.

‘I did know. I couldn’t help hurting. Do you think if I hadn’t known how much I should hurt you I could ever have had the pluck to set you free? They were all against you, Nigel — fighting you with unfair weapons. Through me your hands were tied. Would you have had me selfish enough to let them beat you?’

And remembering what I had suffered when I thought I had lost her, I answered:

'Yes — a hundred times.'

'Isn't it queer?' she said, grave eyes on mine, 'but I wanted that answer. Just as I wanted — prayed that when your hands were free — when you believed I'd failed you in the big moment you would still fight fair — and you did — you did.' She straightened and stretched out her arms. 'Do you know how I love you for that — how big it makes you for me?'

'For misunderstanding and misunderstanding,' I repeated. 'Philida, is there anything in this adorable you I really understand, except that without you everything's nothing?'

The taxi-driver leaned a little from his seat so that we could see the watch in the palm of his hand.

'It's no business o' mine,' he said, and he left it at that.

It was Philida who answered him.

'You couldn't have chosen a better moment. We've come to the most marvellous understanding.'

14

To the immense potentialities of a new day I awoke to find Marshall fully dressed standing beside my bed.

'For mercy's sake, get up,' he said. 'The sight of a man smiling in his sleep makes me positively sick. Anyway, some one's called to see you.'

'Who is it?'

'Name of Craven. Know him?'

I grinned.

'A bit. We knocked up against one another in Ponta Rica.'

'I'll send him up, then.' At the door Marshall turned. 'How did you get in last night? Marian says you hadn't a key.'

'Shinned up the portico and through the first-floor window. It was a bit late to disturb the household.'

Marshall came back, shook his head, and then shook my hand.

'A complete ass, of course,' he said, 'but so long as you're happy, I suppose it doesn't matter.'

I was stripped to the waist sluicing myself with cold water when Craven came in. In a light-coloured lounge suit, fresh from the tailor's, he stood in the doorway twisting his hat and poking at the toe of one of his brown shoes with the point of a cane. He looked very military and spruce, but there was a hint of discomfiture in his expression and bearing.

'I'm sorry to call so early,' he said, 'but I rather felt — er — that is — well, the last time we met I —'

'Have a chair,' I said. 'Sling those clothes on the bed and sit down.'

But he remained standing.

'I owe you an apology, and I'm here to give it. I treated you like a tough — and — and it rankles.'

'Rot!' I answered. 'I look back on that little scrap of ours as a bright spot.'

'It's decent of you to take that view, but I don't think you quite understand. It wouldn't have been so bad if I'd honestly believed you were a blackguard, but honestly I didn't believe it. My instincts told me you were all right, but I'd been going on for so many years wanting to knock your head off for that show at Düsseldorf that even if you proved you were the Archangel Gabriel I wouldn't have missed the chance. And, damn it all, Praed, even now that I know everything's O.K. and above-board, I can't see you standing there stripped without itching to get my coat off.'

He looked earnest, but there was laughter and friendship at the back of his eyes.

'Look here, Craven,' I said, 'I hate to disappoint

any man that way, but last night Philida Prothero promised to marry me, and if you think I'm going to risk what little beauty nature has given me to the mercy of that long reach of yours, you're mistaken.'

'By Gad, has she?' he exclaimed. 'I'm damned glad. It's a bit early, but how about having a small drink together instead?'

I suppose that was how I came to forget breakfast that morning, and accepted from Marian something compounded of sherry and eggs. It may also explain my sudden rush of sympathy for the rest of the world, and Hugh Chalice in particular.

'For,' as I said to Philida a little later, 'he's a good boy, and he loves you, and this day that means everything to me'll be a tough fence for him to scramble over.'

Her attitude was a shade unsympathetic.

'You're awfully wrong,' she said. 'Of course he doesn't. And if it comes to that, there's Nancy.'

'That's pure imagination,' I said, and felt wretchedly uncomfortable.

'Don't colour,' she implored. 'Who can help these things? Of course if you really feel full of altruism and want to do the right thing, go and see the boy. He's staying with his mother at Kensington Court. We'll drive there now, and I can wait in the taxi while you break the news and his heart. He's young enough to recover, I expect.'

She treated it all so lightly.

'Not from you,' I said, and was serious.

'People do recover from all sorts of calamities, like you and me, Nigel.'

Thus, to prove her wrong, which I take to be an earnest of man's devotion to a woman, I hired the first taxi and drove to Kensington forthwith. And,

faithful to her word, Philida waited below while a lift hoisted me to a level above the tops of trees.

And here, much more exactly dressed than he was wont to appear at Ponta Rica, I found Hugh Chalice. As a matter of fact, he nearly embraced me when I was shown into the room — a room that bore all the tokens of reception, being rich in roses, tidiness, and conveniently de-lidded cartons of chocolates.

A trim maid had barely opened the door when Hugh Chalice, from an observation post at the window, projected himself towards me with every manifestation of delight.

Strange to say, before ever he reached me, ninety per cent of his enthusiasm fell from him like a cloak. True, he greeted me with some measure of cordiality, but it was a cordiality tempered with surprise and disappointment.

In an awkward fashion he offered me a chair, and even a chocolate, for which I had neither heart nor inclination. He then appointed himself by the fireplace, and shuffled his feet and seemed to be waiting for something which I was at difficulty to provide. After all, the task of blighting a young man's life in his mother's drawing-room is something disagreeable to a person of sensibility. My own happiness was marred by the thought of the pain it must inflict. For that reason I myself fell to shuffling and raspings of the throat and other evidence of embarrassment. It was clear enough that Hugh Chalice, good fellow as I knew him to be, was anxious to help me out, for he kept glancing at door and window, tapping his teeth, and framing words for sentences that never found expression. He must have anticipated the object of my visit, but was at pains to avoid the actual issue.

At last he said:

'It's first-class you should have come through with flying colours, Praed — and any other time I'd be all out to celebrate the victory, and so forth, but — well, it is a bit awkward ——'

'Yes, it is, old chap,' I nodded, and added some tripe about one man's gain being another's loss.

'Being dead may help him not to feel the loss,' was the startling reply.

'Hang on! It can't be as bad as that,' said I, jumping up and taking a grip of his shoulder.

'Well, I don't know — after that clip with the ruler your pal handed him, the trials of this world aren't likely to concern him in the future.'

Wilfully he had switched the allusion to Boas.

I wiped a moist forehead with the back of my hand, and went at it.

'Look here, Hugh, Philida is going to marry me,' I said.

He showed no emotion beyond squeezing my arm.

'Good egg, but it was foregone stuff, old man. 'Course she is.'

He was a sportsman all through. Not a squeal in him.

I don't know whether I could have said any more — anyway, the opportunity was denied me, for into the room walked Nancy Vansiter. And at once it seemed to me that there were only two people in that room, Nancy and Hugh, and further that since last we had met Nancy had been in the company of fairies. All the practical shrewdness of her lovely little face had vanished into a mist of glory.

As for Hugh, he seemed to approach her on all fours. It was idiotic. In frowning amazement I stared from one to the other.

When presently it dawned on Nancy that in a dim and distant past she and I had been casually acquainted, she turned to me with a twisted eyebrow.

'Don't stand there like a corseted bloodhound, Nigel Praed,' she implored. 'All kinds of things happen in a boat at sea when stars are out. Apart from ourselves there's nothing too wonderful in this.'

Then, as I was unable to say anything coherent:

'Don't forget your Philida is waiting in that taxi by the sidewalk.'

Hugh Chalice came forward with the offer of a cigar — and it was patent to me that in his mother's drawing-room a cigar would not be appreciated.

'Thanks,' I said, 'I'll go without the bribe.'

They kept me to my word eagerly.

In the taxi Philida was laughing, and continued to laugh as we drove westward.

'Of course,' I said, staring at her, 'I'm terribly glad, but feeling for you as he did — that boy — it amazes me.'

'And, of course,' she replied in mock gravity, 'I'm terribly glad, but feeling for you as she did — that girl ——'

'Oh, rot!' I said.

We drove on past the Albert Memorial — token of enduring affection.

THE END

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